



TROPHIES THROUGH *the* LENS

The Conservationist Way to Shoot in Africa with Jack Kenner

By Stephanie Beliles | Photography by Jack Kenner

Last summer, the world reacted to the tragic news that an American dentist killed a beloved African lion, for sport. The imagery of a person standing next to a lifeless creature is gruesome, but how do you let adventure-seeking people who enjoy the hunt collect on their pursuit and capture the memory without contributing to an ecological disaster? You shoot the animal: with a Nikon or Cannon. And Jack Kenner is the best man to guide you on that quest.

Photographer Jack Kenner went to Memphis State University and studied journalism and film, because MSU did not have photography as a major. He later graduated from the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, CA, and eventually found himself back in Memphis.



After working off his student debt, Jack followed his passion for photographing animals and took off to Africa. Trekking across Kenya and Tanzania with a British guide and two Masai (a driver and a cook), Jack embarked on the ultimate African experience. He slept on the ground in tents, and he shot 300 rolls of film. He was hooked, but not only because of the adventure, but because of the call to action in stopping the loss of some of the world's most magnificent creatures. This process spawned "Trophies through the Lens," a wildlife photography tutorial by Jack himself, followed by the practical field work via a photography safari in Africa. The program was designed by Jack to not only to fine-tune photography skills, but to raise awareness of the tragedies occurring in African bush.



"In the last few years I've watched what is happening through poaching, and greed, to the great creatures in Africa, particularly the rhino and elephant. But it's happening all over our planet...and it horrifies me," notes Jack. He believes that our youth are the solution, and that teaching them the importance of conservation and human responsibility to our planet is the first step in protecting endangered species.

Not only is it important to conserve wildlife for ecological and moral reasons, but it is increasingly suspected that illegal wildlife trafficking has serious implications for the security and prosperity of people around the world. Illegal wildlife poaching and trafficking is one of the world's top criminal activities, ranked alongside drugs, arms and human trafficking. Three years ago, the Elephant Action League conducted an 18-month undercover investigation into the link between Al-Shabaab and the illegal trafficking of ivory through Kenya. The published findings suggest that Al-Shabaab has been actively buying and selling ivory to fund its militant operations, and that ivory trafficking "could be supplying up to 40% of the funds needed to keep them in business."

Aside from the link to national security, poaching wrecks an established natural ecosystem. Eliminating an animal from the planet greatly affects our environment; a species becoming extinct upsets the food chain, changes topography, and starts a negative domino effect on our environment. Elephants, tigers, rhinoceros and Asian bears face the biggest survival challenges due to poaching. These animals have body parts that are considered highly valuable. An example closer to home is when the North American Gray Wolf was on the brink of extinction, due to trophy hunting and poaching, and the elk populations in Yellowstone National Park soared. With no natural predator, the elk nearly ate the aspen tree to extinction. However, the world's ecosystems are reliant on each other. What happens to a species in Africa is consequential to everyone everywhere.

Since 1990, Jack has been lecturing at the Memphis Zoo and the Naples Zoo about the importance of preserving our planet's ecosystems and wild creatures. He has traveled the world on assignments for the last 40 years, working for various governments and industries, to photograph wildlife. He has firsthand witnessed the threats humans have placed on natural habitats, as well as seen it grow increasingly worse over time. Jack created "Trophies

through the Lens" as a way to raise awareness, as well as a creative process for people to enjoy.

Jack takes his pupils to the zoo and teaches them how to photograph animals. He believes people can learn to better communicate through good photography, saying, "And I'm talking about real photography, not just a snap shot with your smartphone, but actually using all parts of a camera and solid composition and light to create meaningful images that convey important messages to others. Our way of communicating with one another is now more reliant on visual than ever and a picture has no language barriers." So Jack mentors folks on how to conduct the ultimate "show-and-tell" that involves imagination and meaning, rather than showcasing mounted dead animals.

"Trophies through the Lens" as a concept is a way to make conservation actionable. Through it, Jack has created opportunities for experiential learning: for children and adults to develop photography skills to capture wildlife through their lens, then take them to a place where they can practice and learn how to perfect their skills in the field. "As I learned by being there, when they see it in real life, they get it...they get why it is so important for all of us to fight to preserve our planet and protect its creatures, especially endangered species." Then, when the student gets back to Memphis, Jack showcases the work in an exhibition, just like a professional photographer. The totality of the experience makes it indelible.

"My approach to experiential learning is certainly a model that works. The children and adults that participate learn new ways to apply math, artistic design; they expand their creativity, and presentation skills, all while they are also learning natural science, history, biology, etc.," notes Jack. He has partnered with an African expedition specialist, and they have worked together to find the best locations in Africa, as well as the top guides from bush camps specializing in programs for teachers, parents and children. Every trip is customized and coordinated to fit the objectives of the group, but all have a focus on photography, species preservation and artistic development and presentation. And Jack would love to do more trips, and to see his passion for animals and preservation grow through others. You can email him at jkenner@earthlink.net to find out how you can shoot an animal through the lens.