

# Picturing Bio-Diversity—From Canal to Circle

By Kimberly Sultze and Jon Hyde

One of the most important global problems of our time is navigating the relationship between humans and other species on the planet. A few relevant statistics offer up a rather sobering picture:

- 16,000 species are currently listed as threatened with extinction by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the UN Environmental Program;
- Current estimates indicate that nearly 150 species per day are becoming extinct;
- At the same time, human populations are on a dramatic rise. We add roughly 76 million people to the earth each year. By 2050, the human population of the earth is predicted to be 8 billion.
- 25 areas on the earth are considered hotspots of biodiversity. They contain about one-half of all known plants and one-third of all known terrestrial vertebrates.

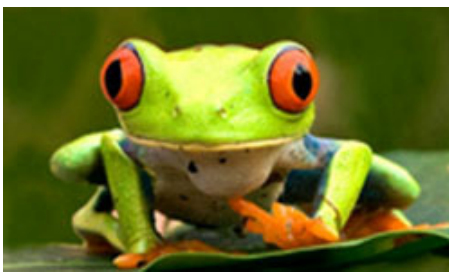


Gray Wolf of the Canyon Pack: Wolves were re-introduced to Yellowstone in 1995 after a twenty year, multi-agency and multi-organization effort. Wolves are a keystone species in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Photo by Hyde-Sultze Photography.

These numbers offer just a glimpse of the kinds of issues that we face on a global scale.

They also served as one launching point for research that we began conducting over the past year. In 2008, as part of our sabbatical research, we traveled to Central America to examine several critical areas of high biodiversity. Our aim was to better understand the 'state of the wild' and the ways in which people in different parts of the world are addressing issues of wildlife and habitat conservation.

Our work began just south of the Panama Canal—one of the most important wildlife corridors in the western hemisphere. Over the next three months, this work took us up the Central Cordillera Mountain Range through some of the most environmentally rich and sensitive areas of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Belize. We then picked up travels again along the U.S.-Mexico border and worked our way from the "Sky Islands" of Arizona through the Rocky Mountains of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, and Montana. Ultimately, our eventual aim is to continue this work through Canada and Alaska to the Arctic Circle.



Red-Eyed Tree Frog, Nicaragua. Frogs and other amphibians are declining rapidly worldwide, and the trend appears to be getting worse. 32.5% of known species of amphibians are globally threatened. Photo by Hyde-Sultze

Throughout these travels our focus has been on exploring what's happening now. Who are the different "players" involved in environmental conservation (or degradation) and what are they doing? What we can learn from existing efforts by conservation and education organizations, governments and government agencies, communication specialists, media professionals, individual citizens, authors, business owners, and regional wildlife alliances?

A larger question is this one: How can humans learn to live alongside and along with other species rather than

Photography. living at their expense? What aspects of our social organizations, philosophies, political processes, ethical foundations, economic approaches, sciences, stories, and communication strategies need to be reviewed, adjusted, or reinvented in order to make a less homo sapiens-centric behavior possible?

What's implied here is a basic assumption: No single discipline can lead us to full answers to these questions. Like all significant global problems, this one will necessitate a multi- and inter-disciplinary set of approaches—and the kind of creative solutions that will come from intellectual flexibility rather than mental rigidity or disciplinary dogma.

The good news is this: While global habitat destruction/conservation is a large-scale and multi-faceted issue, we are convinced that Small Step Number One in the solution to this problem is cheap, easy, concrete, and local.

Walk Outside. Slow Down. De-mediate. Notice.

The first barrier is Perceptual. Most of us humans, most of the time, are pretty oblivious to the flora and fauna living outside around us right now. A recent national study found that children could identify over 1000 logos/brand names but could identify less than 10 plants and animals. Before we can figure out how to be good stewards of the natural world, we need to recognize, appreciate, and attempt to understand it. Any plan for an environmental ethics needs to start here.

Wherever you are right now, step outside and find an animal or plant you don't know and get to know it—depending on where you are, make that creature your neotropical or boreal or subalpine or suburban companion. Cultivate a sense of curiosity, awe, and wonder. The desire to conserve rises here.