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From 'Ahhh' to 'Oh!'

Respectful CPR: Conservation, Preservation and Restoration

By Monica Reekie

In 2013 and 2014, life-changing opportunities with Lindblad Expeditions/National Geographic found my heart and soul become completely captivated by a group of islands 960 kilometres west of Ecuador along the equator — The Galapagos.

The wild beauty and serenity of this mystical place had the feeling of going back in time. The species of sea and land birds, mammals and reptiles comprise some of the highest levels of endemism on Earth.

The 13 finch species have evolved according to the environs and food supply of the island on which they live. Recent discoveries include one finch with the ability to adapt its beak twice a year according to its seasonal food source, a

previously unknown pink land iguana, a genetically unique giant tortoise and hammerhead breeding grounds.

The most extraordinary observation was the wildlife had no fear of people. Though not tame and visitors must



keep a respectful distance, the creatures appeared oblivious to human presence and seemed just as curious about me as I was about them.

While sitting on a beach with 100 or more sea lions, three of them came

very close to me to lie down and have a nap. Swimming among playful sea lions, beautiful fish, and sea turtles; walking along a pristine beach with red, white, green or black sand; tiptoeing over pahoehoe being careful to avoid the

ever-so-docile marine iguanas warming themselves in the sun; hiking to the top of a crater for breathtaking views; being face to face with a giant tortoise and watching a sea turtle journey back to the ocean after laying her eggs in a pro-



tected breeding site are a few spectacular memories.

Even the vegetation varies greatly from island to island, ranging from desert to lush cloud-forest to moorland.

Conservation is paramount and taken very seriously. Nature is free and unspoiled, the hand of man carefully controlled and dialed back wherever possible. Every effort is being made to protect this paradise. It is an ongoing success story proving that with respectful CPR – Conservation, Preservation and Restoration – nature is persevering for future generations of wildlife and flora to survive and thrive.

Next, I went north, to Svalbard, to see majestic polar bears. Fifty nautical miles



south of the archipelago, the expedition ship felt as if it listed when “bear to port” broke the silence and everyone rushed with cameras and binoculars in hand. A young male was a fair distance away, but not displaying normal curiosity, he moved away from the ship, nervously looking back.

Through my telephoto lens, I noted that he was emaciated and scarred, his hip and pelvic bones clearly visible beneath his ragged fur, even his ribs could be seen when he turned. I immediately felt heartache for this frail creature. His small ice floe was drifting out to sea. The naturalist indicated he was likely four years old and on a grading scale of 1 to 5, (1 being near death and 5 being

healthy and thriving), this individual was a 1, and bears in this condition simply stop walking, lie down and die.

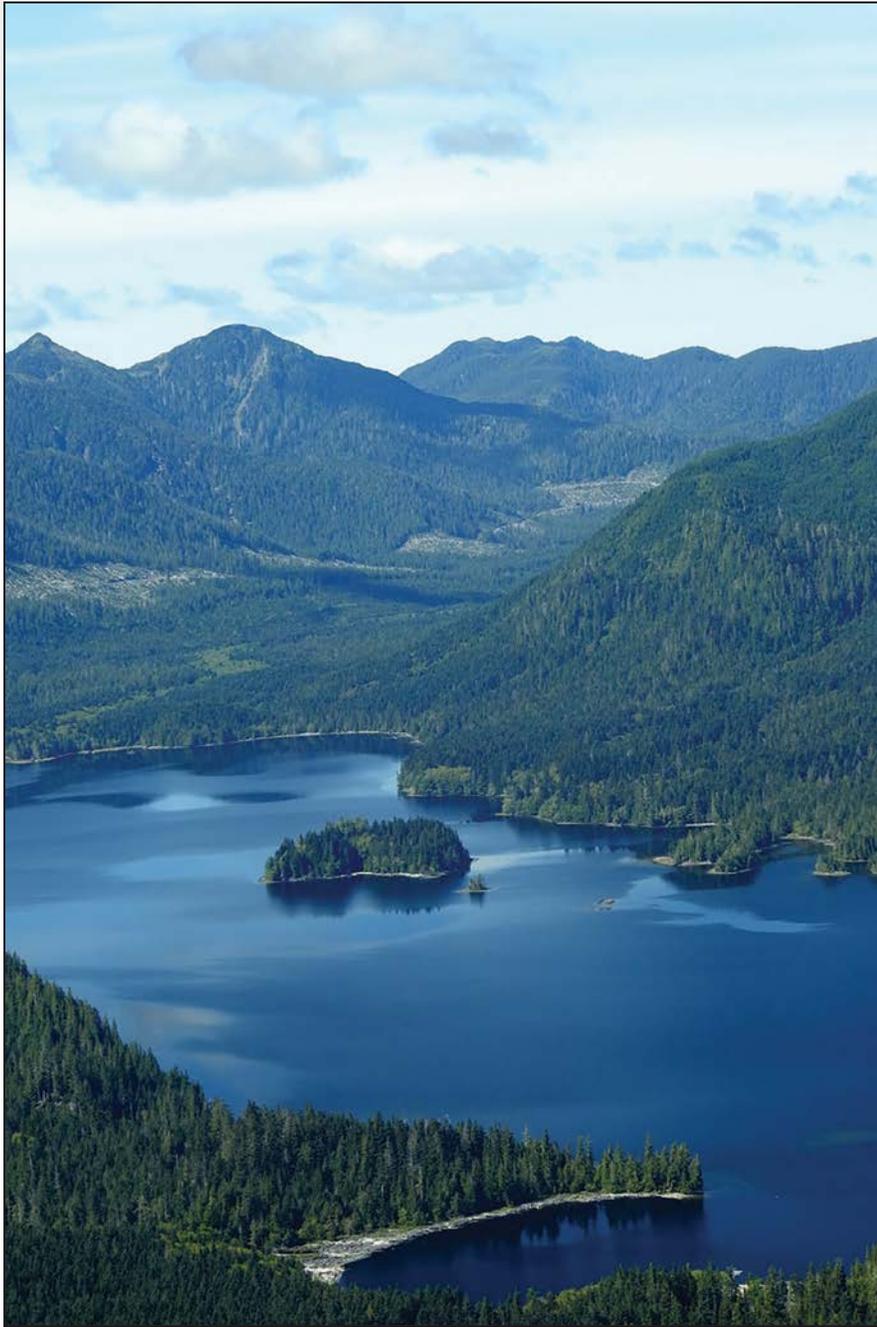
Throughout the journey exploring stunningly beautiful, albeit stark, landscapes of Svalbard, unique topography at each landing site, viewing birds, wildlife and even a blue whale, I constantly scanned the terrain for another polar bear. The landscapes were pristine, only a few old relics of long-gone human presence.

One particular beach landing left an indelible image on my psyche. Thousands of whale bones and skulls extended the entire length of the water’s edge near a ramshackle old whaling station. The evidence of the carnage was

haunting. Our naturalist remarked on how far the glaciers had retreated since the previous summer, many no longer reaching the ocean’s edge, glacial fractures visible as far as the eye could see.

Alas, there were no other polar bears. Viewing my images in larger format, those of the lone polar bear tug at my heartstrings. Initially, I was disappointed that the images are a little fuzzy, the ice disappearing in the distance, but it makes them more poignant. They remind me that not only the polar bears, but all of the arctic inhabitants and creatures on annual migrations, have a fuzzy future.

In the final picture that I took of the bear that day, he was lying down on the



ice, motionless, with his eyes half closed, and I will always wonder ...

A visit to Haida Gwaii completed the circle.

By restoring the balance and integrity of the ecosystems and cultural heritage of the Haida people, with hard work, traditional knowledge, scientific research, tense stand-offs, and resilience, Gwaii Haanas has been designated “protected from the top of the mountains to the bottom of the sea.” Preserved is a way of life in which humans and the super-

natural are woven inextricably with the land and sea.

Conservation will enable the natural restoration of temperate rainforests and regeneration of the forests will in turn support the recovery process of the flora, sea and land birds and mammal populations resulting in a naturally functioning ecosystem.

SGang Gwaay Llnagaay, renowned for monumental memorial and mortuary poles, is highly protected. Access is controlled and limited. Haida Watchmen

guide visitors along boardwalks designed to protect the sensitive cultural and ecological habitat while educating guests about the people, customs, folklore and environment.

Although these historic standing poles are destined to return to the Earth as a natural process, with the agreement of the Haida hereditary leaders, some of the poles were straightened and now have annual conservation work.

My visit to Haida Gwaii, and particularly SGang Gwaay, reconnected me



with the supernatural aspects of nature in an unexpectedly powerful way. A calm, peaceful stillness envelops this area. Although I heard the Watchman's words, I listened to the sounds of gentle breezes, birds, crackles in the forest and waves kissing the shoreline. I was drifting, being transported through the spaces of the surreal and mystical.

Three completely different, uniquely beautiful places brought me here. Galapagos with the easy connections to wildlife and birds specifically adapted to

their varied habitats, Haida Gwaii and its spiritual connections with the natural world and ancient human wisdom and Svalbard's rugged beauty and wildlife in peril all fostered a sense of urgency to awaken the senses to the magnificence of nature and build a connection to it using photography.

As a gentle nudge, an image can become impressed in a person's memory, once seen cannot be unseen, inspiring a change in thinking from "Ahhh" to "Oh!" ❄

Monica Reekie's photographic subjects have varied widely, but are now more focused on nature and conservation thanks to inspiration gained from working at the Robert Bateman Centre in Victoria, B.C., for almost five years.