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Working Paper

Animal Photojournalism

An Interview with Jo-Anne McArthur and Keith Wilson

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Think Tank Programme

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Jo-Anne McArthur, creator and co-editor of *HIDDEN*, is an award-winning photojournalist who has been documenting the lives of animals for two decades. She has travelled to over 60 countries to photograph people's complex and disturbing treatment of animals for her non-profit photo agency, We Animals Media. In addition to being a juror with World Press Photo and MontPhoto, Jo-Anne has received accolades from competitions such as Wildlife Photographer of the Year, Nature Photographer of the Year, BigPicture, Pictures of the Year International (POYI) and the Global Peace Photo Award. Jo-Anne's work has been published by hundreds of media outlets, and she speaks internationally on the topics of animal photojournalism, the human-animal relationship, social change, and empathy. Jo-Anne makes her work freely available to anyone advocating for animals via the We Animals Media stock site. *HIDDEN* is Jo-Anne's third book, following *We Animals* (2014) and *Captive* (2017).

Keith Wilson is the co-founder (with Britta Jaschinski) of Photographers Against Wildlife Crime, an international group of award-winning photographers who have joined forces to use their powerful and iconic images to help bring an end to the illegal wildlife trade. Their efforts culminated in the publication of *Photographers Against Wildlife Crime* (2018). Keith also edits fine art nature photography books, working with some of Europe's leading landscape and wildlife photographers. Titles include *Zero Footprint* (Leeming+Paterson), *Silver* (Jonathan Chritchley), and *As Long As There Are Animals* (David Lloyd). He is also the editor of the bestselling *Remembering Elephants* and its successor *Remembering Rhinos*, both published for the Born Free Foundation.

This interview was conducted through correspondence in the Autumn of 2021.

PPC: Can you tell us about yourselves? Where were you raised and how did you end up in the field of animal photojournalism?

JMc: I'm from Ottawa, Canada. I attended Ottawa University where I did an undergrad in English literature and Geography. During that time I took an elective class in photography and that's what set my path. I'm grateful to that very inspiring teacher, Lorraine Gilbert. The camera was and still is, to me, an all-access path into the lives of others; a way to discover the world and fulfil my curiosity. It's also this incredible little tool for change, which is ultimately how I came to use it: to illuminate the lives of others, so that we can see, respond, change.

Many photographers are doing that for humans, but few for non-human animals. This is why I'm busy building and promoting animal photojournalism with the We Animals Media team.

KW: I've been a journalist for over 40 years, starting out at The Herald in Melbourne, Australia, which introduced me to press photography and the joy of deadlines! I was a daily news reporter, but the stories I enjoyed most were those when working in partnership with a photographer. So, maybe it was no surprise when leaving Australia for London in the 1980s, that I ended up working in the photography magazine press, becoming editor of Amateur Photographer in 1989, and later devising and launching the well-known titles, Outdoor Photography and Black + White Photography. Since then, I have established myself as an independent photo book editor and author, collaborating with photographers in the fields of conservation, wildlife, documentary photography, and now – with HIDDEN – animal photojournalism.

PPC: Jo and Keith, some readers might be altogether unfamiliar with the notion of animal photojournalism (APJ henceforth). What is APJ? And what does working as an animal photojournalist entail on a daily basis?

JMc: WAM developed a definition which we have posted on our site. We speak and write about it a lot. [Here](#) is that description. Keith was recently describing photojournalism to me as the documentation of the human condition. APJ includes all animals with whom we share our lives, quite intimately in fact (wearing them, eating them, as examples), but whom we often fail to see.

As with many photographers, the making of images is just one piece of a larger puzzle. I'd say that with APJ, a large part of the work really starts when you get a really strong or poignant image. It's then that you want to get it seen, published, discussed, awarded. The point of our work is to educate people, change hearts and minds, influence policy, encourage philanthropy. So, the work of an APJ is also marketing, clear and factual communications, story-telling, entrepreneurial hustle, finding and maintaining funding for the work.

KW: I'm normally wary of putting labels on images or photographers, but in the case of APJ it was absolutely necessary because such a categorisation helps people to define and grasp a subject area that has been overlooked for too long. Not only that, but it could be argued that APJ has the potential to be the biggest genre of photojournalism of all. I'm not joking: simply consider how much has yet to be revealed to the mainstream audience, and the possible impact these images will have on all of us in the years to come. APJ was an inspired piece of thinking by Jo-Anne - having such a term helps us to more readily identify and acknowledge

these images, instead of rejecting them.

PPC: I know that you recently published a ground-breaking book in the field of APJ, [HIDDEN](#), of which I have a copy myself. The book is as extraordinary as it is painful, to read and look at. Could you explain the inception of *HIDDEN*, the ethos of the book, and the process of crafting it?

JMc: I've always been inspired by conflict photography, and I see APJ as a form of that genre. We document incredible violence and suffering that goes almost wholly unreported. It was James Nachtwey's book, *Inferno*, that inspired *HIDDEN*. I wanted to do what he had done - create an unflinching and extraordinary tome of what we do to others - for non-human animals. After one particularly painful night of documenting a wet market in Taiwan, I went back to my hotel room in Taipei and sketched out the bones of the book. I knew that I wanted to work with a really strong editor and designer and am thrilled that I succeeded in that regard, working with Keith Wilson and David Griffin.

KW: The ethos and process of crafting a book like *HIDDEN* is not easy to explain. It is truly unique and, as you say, ground-breaking. But the starkness and brutality of the imagery made it a very difficult edit. While Nachtwey's *Inferno* was Jo-Anne's inspiration, for me the *HIDDEN* pictures inferred other historic parallels that we were careful never to spell out or say. What was uncanny was that when Jo-Anne outlined her idea and vision to me, I immediately got it - the scale of the book, the mood and force, the message, and especially her passion for it. And we were very fortunate to have a designer, David Griffin, who knew how to take our edited selection and place them on the page in a way that amplified the impact of the photos. A lot of this, you can't teach - it's a process that becomes finely honed through many years of experience and a well burnished instinct.

PPC: In *HIDDEN* you say that one of the key aims of the book is to bear witness in the context of our current geological epoch, namely, the Anthropocene (see pdf attached). In the midst of climate change, the sixth mass extinction, the COVID pandemic, and the overwhelming and systemic killing of billions of non-human animals every year, how can we bear witness? What can our readers do in order to bear witness themselves?

JMc: I think the book is useful at this juncture in time because keeping our heads in the (tree-less, eroded, nutrient-deprived, polluted) sand is no longer a possibility. To continue to ignore the animal question is a death sentence. Animal use contributes to the climate crisis,

causes zoonotic diseases, deforestation, pollution, and violently abusing sentient beings is on its own an unethical act to take any part in. Many of us don't know about the systemic violence that animals must endure, or the industries that breed and kill them. Seeing images and videos is one part of educating people. Seeing is believing. I hope that we will all bear witness to the suffering of others so that we can demand that it change. Not everyone will care but many will. Political activist Susan Sontag wrote about who should bear witness to the suffering of others. Anyone who can help should look. When it comes to animal suffering, that is all of us, because we all take part and have the power to make better decisions.

KW: Jo-Anne is absolutely right: seeing is believing. I would add that you can't reach that point of belief - and the sense of purpose that comes with it - if you don't bear witness. What Jo-Anne and other photographers provide is the evidence that the doubters and deniers of this world insist upon to support the claims of the witnesses! So, with *HIDDEN*, we can now say, 'seeing is believing, and photography is proof'.

PPC: I'm personally very fond of We Animals Media and *HIDDEN*, and at the Global Research Network we want to support your crucial work in every way we can. There is one aspect of your work that some colleagues of ours are concerned with, namely, taking and exhibiting pictures of animals who are exploited in the Global South. The argument that I usually hear is that our societies are structurally racist and so portraying photographs of animals in factory farms located in the Global South could have the collateral effect of fuelling racism. Of course, that's far from the aim of We Animals Media. Your aim is to expose the suffering of animals worldwide since the exploitation of animals is, indeed, a global phenomenon. But some would still object and suggest that we should focus on changing the Global North. Do you have any responses to that kind of objection?

JMc: I think that the non-human animals in the Global South would want defenders too. I agree that racism is rampant and that APJs can play a role in changing that, and that WAM has a role in discussing and curbing it too because we have worked internationally. While WAM's work is global (our contributors documenting both close to their homes and far from their homes), we also support and are working towards NGOs and APJs working where they live, and where they know, so that APJs can be good spokespeople not just for animals but for the people who are working in animal industries. For years WAM was We Animals, a solo project, with just me, a white woman, working globally to document animal suffering which included people in over 60 countries abusing animals. The responsibility that comes with

that is to take active part in the conversations or attacks that are racist, as well as to work alongside people of the Global South to uplift the animal advocacy happening there. I remind all people that systemic violent animal abuse is happening in every country by every race and creed. We should never be pointing fingers, and we should also not vilify the people who have to work in violent jobs.

I'm proud that we now have local photographers in Thailand, Indonesia, Chile, India, China and many other countries, and that we collectively continue to focus on exposing industrial farming complexes globally.

KW: This is a really important observation. And, I agree, the onus should be on all of us in the North to take responsibility for the way the Global South is represented and described in all areas and issues of life - whether political, social, environmental or cultural - and, yes, that goes for the exploitation of animals too. If you look at HIDDEN, most of the images are from the South, which might feed some people's preconceived prejudices towards certain nations and peoples. However, many of the officially sourced statistics and figures quoted in the book are from so-called 'developed' countries, the North. It's important when covering a global issue that journalists and photographers always strive to be balanced, fair, and factual, and not feed into racial stereotypes with their reporting. Easier said than done, I know, but we can but try - and keep trying, which I know Jo-Anne and We Animals Media most certainly are doing every day.

PPC: To return to APJ, I am aware that APJ can be psychologically and physically challenging for photojournalists and even cause trauma. What's your experience in this respect, and how do you deal with the difficulties of being APJs?

JMc: Whether photojournalists are documenting human conflict or animal abuse, we do it because we care a great deal about the individuals in the picture, and we're invested (intellectually, physically, psychologically) in being on the front lines to help create awareness, educate people, and bring about change. We see a lot of suffering and hopelessness and this is hard for us, and I will say that it's hard for people bearing witness to the work we've made as well.

Some people burn out in a few years because the suffering we experience as a result is unbearable and change is too slow to come. Hopelessness can settle in and that can, sometimes very literally for us, be a killer. My relationship to suffering has changed over time and I wish that others could experience it as I do. We are generally afraid of the suffering of others because it makes us suffer. Tolstoy talked about getting as close to you can to

suffering, and try to help. I think it's the helping that is a catharsis, and offers some alleviation to both our own suffering and the suffering of others.

I could (and do!) recommend a number of books about how to handle trauma, and I do wish for us all to live happy lives in the time we have. I always feel very aware of how fleeting life is, and so I compartmentalize the suffering I see and experience, and live with a lot of joy, because there is a lot of goodness in the world, and a lot of good that I, and we, can all do.

KW: I cannot add to what Jo-Anne has written above as this is beyond my personal experience - thankfully. But, let me quote Nick Brandt, who said this about the HIDDEN photographers: "I am, quite simply, in awe of these photographers. In a way, they are like war photographers, except witness to a war that so many people have little idea exists, or choose to suppress that exists. This takes enormous inner strength and bloody-minded determination to illuminate the mass extermination that unfolds every second of every day across the planet."

PPC: What do you think about highlighting animals' lives in spaces such as sanctuaries as well as in factory farms? I ask this because in the field of critical animal studies, where my own work is situated, there seems to be a turn towards affirming and imagining worlds in which human and non-human animals flourish, as opposed to merely alleviating suffering. I also ask this question because you have worked on this in We Animals Media (see [here](#)).

JMc: In our WAM work as in life, I do want to uplift people and show them new possibilities, kinder worlds, and a better future. And so I do think that documenting sanctuary work is important, not only to show a better way of being with animals, but so that we can get to know animals through images and stories, or if you're able, through meeting them in the fur and flesh! But sanctuaries are of course but one of the many ways we can alleviate current suffering and imagine better futures. WAM supports a lot of change-making by doing features on animal law and policy work, plant-based and cultivated meat food tech (Hello from California; in a few hours I'll be photographing two companies that are pioneers in cultivated meat), and sharing stories about the myriad, life-affirming, world-changing projects being done by women on the front lines of animal advocacy globally. Check out those incredible people in our [Unbound Project](#).

KW: It may surprise you that even though much of my work in recent years has involved

working with photojournalists to expose the horrors people inflict upon non-human animals, I remain an optimist. So, giving attention to the good work of sanctuaries, animal advocacy groups, and other progressive initiatives in this field, is important if you're to create a mood for positive change, or at least help mitigate any damage. Put it this way: You must be an optimist if you believe in a better future. Pessimists love describing themselves as realists, but, more often than not, the reality is that they are defeatists.

PPC: Before we finish, could you say a few words about the future directions of animal photojournalism? What changes in public ethos and policy do you want to see?

JMc: We are working towards normalizing APJ in the worlds of photography and media. All animals deserve visibility, respect, and protection, not just the charismatic animals of our choosing, and not just the companion animals. Most wildlife photo competitions now have a category for photojournalism, and a lot of mainstream media now makes space for at least some discussion on factory farming. Encouraging and ushering all of this along, and continuing to provide NGOs, academics, journalists and activists with strong work for their campaigns and writing will continue to be our focus.

KW: I am excited about the potential of APJ once, as Jo-Anne says, the normalizing of APJ in the worlds of photography and media become established, and not requiring constant explanation! It will happen, probably sooner than we think, primarily because of the greater urgency that's being expressed by the wider public about the climate emergency and the fear of another zoonotic viral pandemic. Initially, it might seem that these two issues are taking the focus away from the topics of animal welfare, factory farming, transport and slaughter. On the contrary, these areas are all inextricably linked to the global malaise we are now confronting. This means APJ is well placed to document these interweaving stories by photographing the cause and effect of our treatment and abuse of non-human animals and their wider relevance to the existential crisis that lies before us.

Jo and Keith, thank you very much for this interview, for your generosity, and for the wonderful work you are doing (and have done) at We Animals Media.

To support We Animals Media, click [here](#). To purchase *HIDDEN*, click [here](#).