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There is no question that as our planet gets warmer much more than our climate is at risk. Our wildlife is vanishing at an alarming rate. Shocking results published in April this year by the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) of Nairobi document a catastrophic decline in wild ungulate populations in Kenya's premier Maasai Mara National Reserve. Our lion population has been markedly reduced from the use of carbamate pesticides. It doesn't stop there. Vultures and other bird of prey that don't recognise game fences and political boundaries are also fast disappearing. We have almost entirely lost species such as the African Marsh Harrier and the Egyptian Vulture. We are certainly the cause – but we are also the solution.

It doesn't help that we are living in an age where there is a direct correlation between the rate of technological advancement and biodiversity impoverishment. While many people give up in the face of

Above: Tierra's image epitomises the essence of Lake Naivasha's tranquility and provides hope for the future survival of this fragile and threatened ecosystem

adversity, I have been brought up to learn how to turn a crisis into an opportunity. Fortunately, we are able to harness some of this modern technology to collect valuable scientific data to enable us to develop conservation plans and interventions based on sound science. The use of photography through modern digital cameras is one way of spreading the conservation message. In the words of David Slater, a world-renowned photographer, "the art of conservation photography is fast becoming a universally understood pictorial voice exclaiming not just the beauty of our world but its fragility and diversity as well. It's an introduction to those who have

never thought about how wonderful and exciting our planet and its wildlife is, and hopes to convey some sense of empathy and urgency amongst its viewers to inspire them to act in their own ways to save threatened habitats." It is the young generation of today that holds the key to safeguarding what is left of the world's resources.

With this concept in mind, eight students of the 9th Grade (14-15 year olds) from the International School of Kenya participated in a pilot workshop on "Raptor Conservation Photography for Kids" organised by Dr Munir Virani of The Peregrine Fund and National Museums of Kenya at the Elsamere

SPREADING THE CONSERVATION MESSAGE BY CAMERA

Right: **Students learn about aspects of radio-telemetry**

Below left: **Students engrossed in photographing some birds**

Below Right: **Munir explains how images can help measure populations of cliff nesting vultures in Hell's Gate National Park**



Field Study Centre, Naivasha. With help from reputed Kenyan wildlife and nature photographer Teeku Patel, (see his prize-winning photograph in Frontlines) they were given an introduction to the conservation problems affecting Lake Naivasha's raptors such as African Fish Eagles, Augur Buzzards and Ruppell's Vultures (extensively researched by The Peregrine Fund and the National Museums of Kenya).

This was followed by a hands-on approach on basic photographic techniques and radio-telemetry. Armed with this knowledge, the students got a rare opportunity to understand how photography plays a crucial role in achieving conservation goals. The students appreciated how photos depicting colonies of cliff-nesting Ruppell's Vultures in Hell's Gate National Park and close-ups of ringed African Fish Eagles at Lake Naivasha were being used to collect scientifically sound data, critical in establishing population trends of these birds to monitor rates of decline. The students got

down and dirty to take photos in the field and present their own perspective of how these could be used to achieve conservation. Jeannine Bock, the accompanying teacher said "the students were engaged and eager participants. They came away with a far greater understanding of raptors, conservation issues and photographic techniques. Even more importantly, they have a real desire to take this knowledge and pursue an avenue to effect change."

With young children so dependent on cell phones, Ipods and shopping malls, it was refreshing to see these students exhibit genuine field enthusiasm, a keen eye for nature and a thirst to understand how conservation and photography can be linked to safeguard Kenya's natural resources so that they can be protected. The old adage that "we learn so much from children" certainly holds true as children see the world differently from we adults. They have creative minds with an ability to absorb information like sponges.

Dr Munir Virani is the Africa Program Director for The Peregrine Fund, a US-based conservation organization dedicated to the protection of birds of prey globally. He is also a Research Associate of the National Museums of Kenya.

Hetal (Teeku) Patel is a Wildlife & Nature Photographer specializing in conservation issues.

The key is to transform their creativity through the lens to conservation ideals so that they can motivate those who are in a position to do so - politicians, private foundations, the general public and corporations are impacted by great photos by great photographers. While children may not have state-of-the-art cameras, they possess originality and have the imagination to produce images that inspire. But they need direction just as the arrow needs a bow to hit a target. As conservationists and photographers, we have a moral obligation to impart our knowledge to the young generation of today. It is that ONE photo that can have more conservation impact than an entire library of scientific papers and survey data.

For more information about participating in a Raptor Conservation Photography workshop, kindly contact the Swara editor. ●

– Munir Virani