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# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER AMI VITALE SPEAKS OF WILD HOPE



*National Geographic Photographer Ami Vitale Speaks of Wild Hope*

ROBERT BERNSTEIN (/NEWS/CATEGORY/ROBERT-BERNSTEIN) / MAY 03 2022 08:38 AM / BYSBROBERT (/ARTICLES/SBROBERT) / 0 COMMENTS  
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*By Robert Bernstein*

UCSB Arts and Lectures hosted National Geographic photographer Ami Vitale for her presentation "Wild Hope" on May 1.

She said she was painfully shy as a child. Her mother tried to give her more courage by dressing her up as a lion and photographing her that way. Nothing worked. Until she discovered photography.

Photography gave Vitale a way to focus on others instead of on herself and it transformed her life.

She moved to the Czech Republic and learned to photograph people by connecting with them.

She went to various war zones and found herself in some challenging situations. She showed us a photo in Gaza during the Second Intifada. A soldier was running toward her with a big gun and there was a building in ruins behind him. She said she had been running to get inside that building. But she dropped all her camera batteries on the ground and scrambled to pick them up. As she was doing this, a helicopter fired a missile into the building she would have been inside. Very lucky.

Then she was off to Guinea-Bissau for a short stay that turned into six months. She loved the people and the country and learned a lot. The locals were fascinated by her. She was in her mid-20s and did not have a husband or a child. A total mystery to them. But it was even more of a mystery to them that she had no idea how to go to the well and retrieve water and carry it back.

She tried balancing the water jug on her head, but by the time she got back almost all the water had sloshed out and she was drenched! She had a lot to learn and she enjoyed the challenge.



They had a ritual series of questions they would ask in the morning. One of them mystified her: Did you wake up one by one or all together? She eventually came to understand the meaning. People traditionally slept together. If something traumatic happens, then everyone is awakened at once. So, if people wake up one by one, it means that they had a restful sleep with no disaster!

Her next adventure was to visit Kashmir. Another short visit that became months and eventually five years. Kashmir is famous as being "Paradise on Earth" for its beauty. Unfortunately, it is also famous for being caught in a battle between India and Pakistan for who it belongs to.

She showed how it was heavily militarized and how the Hindus have mostly fled the conflict.

Radical Muslims posted fliers warning women that they had to wear burkas or risk having acid thrown in their faces. Vitale went to a tailor to see about having one made. Another woman there joked that it was all a conspiracy by the tailors to get more work. Unfortunately, it was not. There really are such awful people.

She followed a pilgrimage to Amernath Cave in Kashmir. It involved a long hike through snow covered mountains. But at the start it was not very cold and she was dressed in a t-shirt and shorts. She had hired a porter to carry her warm clothes for when it would get colder.

But when it got colder she discovered the "porter" was actually a thief who stole all of her belongings. She feared for what would happen when things got even colder. She considered turning back. But she said it turned out to be a wonderful experience. She decided that the discomfort brought her closer to how the local people lived.

She said that when they arrived at their destination, people were very generous about sharing their food and their "stinky blankets" which she said with a laugh!

She became very focused on the ceremony happening that had everyone's attention. She calls this "tunnel vision" and it is what you must avoid as a photographer and reporter. And perhaps as a realized human being in general.

She suddenly realized that the really interesting photo was to be had by shooting back from the center of attention back to the crowd of people arrayed in front of a magnificent stand of birch trees. It was a magical scene that she almost missed. But she didn't!



Then she was off to Afghanistan. She said that 70% of the population is under the age of 25. They have never known life under the Taliban. They have known a generation of relative freedom and opportunity for women. She seemed hopeful that these young people are not going to let the Taliban push them back to the horrors of the past.

Vitale also showed photos of the natural beauty of Afghanistan that the world does not see in the news of war and oppression.

She mentioned how she was living in the Czech Republic. The Dvůr Králové Zoo there had the last remaining Northern White Rhinos in the world. They decided to return them to the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya in the desperate hope that they would breed. The Conservancy had 24 hour guards to protect the rhinos from very persistent poachers.

Vitale pointed out a bit of good news: During 2020 there was a big drop in poaching. When the rhinos were released, the indigenous people asked to view the tracks of the rhinos so they could determine which people got near them.

For all of this effort, the last remaining male Northern White Rhino died of old age. His name was Sudan and he was lovingly cared for by the local people at the Conservancy. But it was a tragic moment as all hope was over for maintaining the species.



Except maybe not. The females Najin and Fatu were too old to become pregnant. But eggs were collected from them and combined with sperm from two different deceased males. A heroic effort by scientists resulted in 14 embryos being created, which were then carried by surrogate mothers of another subspecies.

Vitale went on to talk about threats to elephants and what is being done to rescue them at the Samburu National Reserve in Kenya along with neighboring Shaba National Reserve. The biggest threat? The Climate Crisis. It is causing unprecedented droughts without end.

The biggest threat is animals dying of thirst or for lack of food. But she showed a case where a baby elephant fell into a well in a desperate search for water. That particular baby was rescued, but the problem is vast.

One challenge is feeding baby elephants whose mothers have died from the drought or from poaching. A surprising solution: Goat's milk!

One of her main take-away messages from her talk: We hear about the cruel poachers who cut off the tusks of an elephant or the horn of a rhino and leave the animal to suffer and die. But for every one of those, there are many more local people who truly love and care for the animals. She emphasized the importance of harnessing that positive, loving energy.

Vitale then crossed to the other side of the world to cover the situation with pandas in China. She visited a reserve where pandas are being brought back from the brink of extinction. She described her frustration when she was told her photo shoot was over before she had gotten a good shot. Just then she got the perfect shot. A lesson all photographers must learn: No matter what is going on, "just keep shooting!".



One point she conveyed about pandas is how rare and solitary they are in nature. She noted that traditional Chinese art rarely depicts pandas because of their rarity.

The biggest challenge to restore pandas? Females are only fertile for 24-72 hours out of an entire year. Breeding programs were failing because the females were rejecting the males they were paired with. Breeders tried everything. Even showing "panda porn" videos!

The solution? Offering the female a choice of multiple males!

To be returned to the wild, pandas need to be raised in a way that keeps them away from humans. This means that the human handlers have to dress in panda suits all day long. And since pandas cue off of scent more than sight, the panda suits have to be laced with panda urine. A challenge for the human handlers!

Before a panda can be released into the wild, they have to pass a test. They are presented with a stuffed jaguar that emits jaguar sounds and scents. If the panda sniffs it out of curiosity, it will return to captivity. To pass the test, the panda must flee the jaguar.

And releases to the wild only make sense in the context of proper reforestation.

Vitale ended her talk with a pitch for a humanitarian relief effort organized by National Geographic photographers. They have donated signed photos to raise money for Direct Relief International rescue efforts for people in Ukraine, Yemen and other urgent crisis areas. Even Jane Goodall joined in the effort!

You can go to <https://vitalimpacts.org/collections/impact-now> until May 10 to buy these unique prints.

Vitale then took questions from the crowd at Campbell Hall at UCSB.



She explained the importance of connecting with the people before photographing them. You have to build that trust and connection first. It can be as simple as showing them your camera and asking if it is OK.

"Go slow to go fast" is valuable advice. Listen. Don't have an agenda. She gets refused all the time. She has developed a thick skin.

She was asked about other animals she was photographing. She noted that the animals in her talk were mostly "cute" or otherwise popular animals. She said that going forward she needs to advocate for less cute animals that are in just as much danger of extinction.

She was asked how she powers her equipment in these remote places without electricity. "Goal Zero" is a company that makes the solar power systems that she uses.



The final question for her was how to get started in a career like hers. "Try everything. Find your passion." Seek out resources online. Apply for grants. I left in awe of both the challenges and the hope that she showed us.



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