

PUSHING THE LIMITS FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY



THE EXPLORERS JOURNAL

SUMMER 2006

A Haunting
& Harrowing
Journey into
Myanmar

A Lifetime Pursuit of
Giant Squid

The First Descent of
Colca Canyon

EXPLORERS

Myanmar's Forbidden Wilderness

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TEXT BY SHARON GUYNUP AND STEVE WINTER

I trained my lens on the lush, unbroken forest passing 1,000 feet below us and on the jagged, icy mountains in the distance. I adjusted my shutter speed to compensate for the teeth-rattling vibration of the Polish Cold War-era military helicopter transporting us to Tahundan, the last village in the remote, uncharted, northernmost peaks of Myanmar.

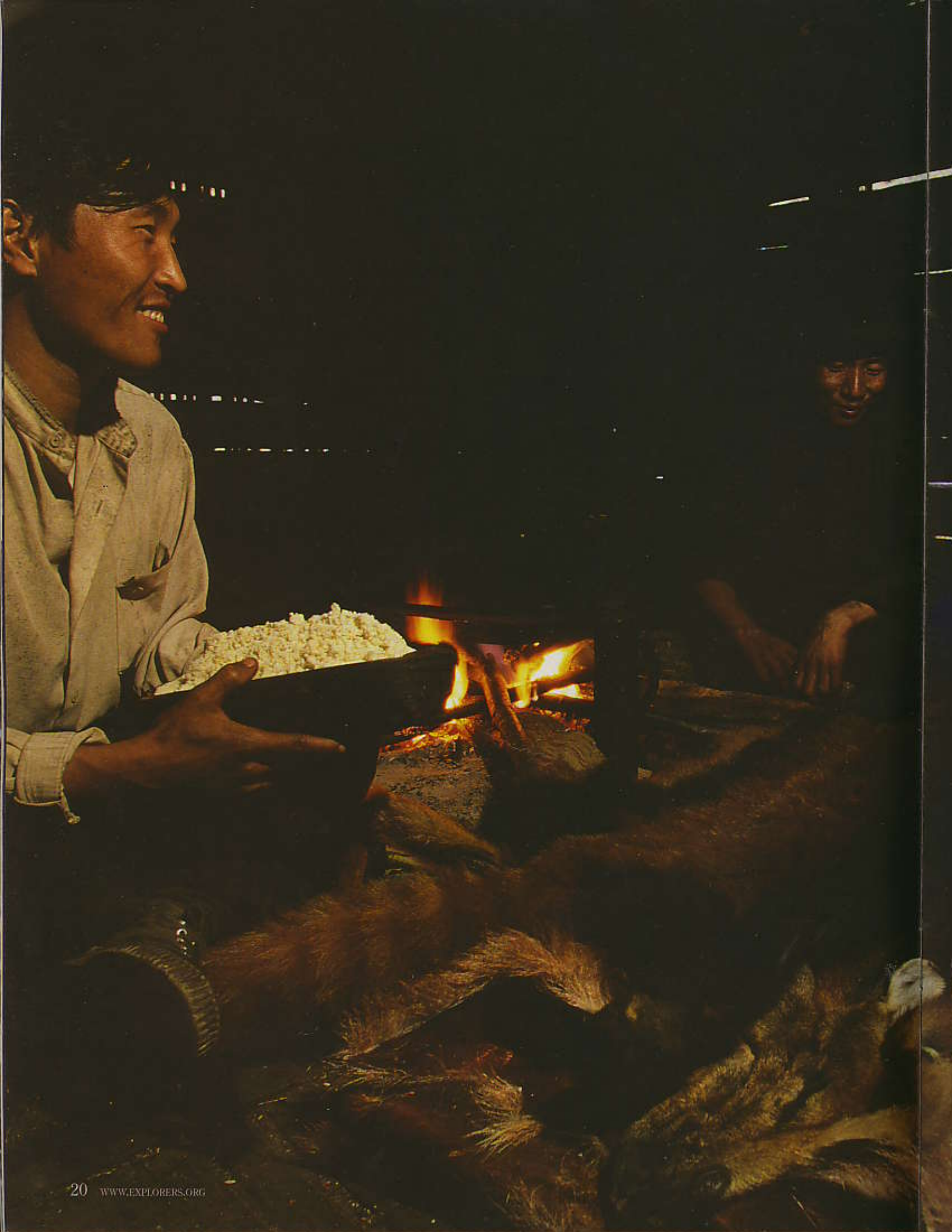
When I lowered the camera, I gasped. Instead of opening up, the canyon we were flying through ended abruptly. Directly in front of us loomed a sheer cliff. I reached for the door handle, preparing to jump, as the pilot manhandled the copter into a 180-degree turn. It seemed to stop midair, shaking like a blender. It felt like every rivet was going to pop—but we managed to avoid crashing into the mountain. For a good ten minutes after, strong downdrafts buffeted the craft. We kept dropping altitude.

Finally the helicopter stabilized, and the pilot landed in a field beside a tiny village of just a few huts. He told us we were in Tahundan. We looked at him like he was crazy. We were actually in Talahtu, a good 12 miles away, but the pilot refused to take us farther. By the time he radioed headquarters, we were two hours overdue. Rumors flew around Yangon among officials and on the news; we'd crashed or been kidnapped by local tribesmen. The army was already looking for us, dead or alive.

I was traveling with a team of four Burmese wildlife biologists headed by Alan Rabinowitz, Director of Science and Exploration at the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), whom the *New York Times* once dubbed "the Indiana Jones of zoology." My mission: to photograph the five-week expedition into Myanmar's "icy mountains." Alan's prior field studies had helped create the 1,472-square-mile Hkakabo Razi National Park there two years before. Of particular concern was the trade in salt and tea for animal parts used in traditional Chinese medicine.

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Before we'd boarded the flight, we'd spent three days waiting for the pass to clear enough to fly out of the northern city of Putao. Every day we went to the airfield and, when we couldn't take off, Alan hung around teaching the military pilot how to use a GPS. The pilot knew only line-of-sight navigation using a map and compass. We figured that was how he almost ran into that cliff: he and the copilot must have been fiddling with the GPS rather than looking out the window!

We hired porters and left the next morning at first light. We picked our way along a river trail through a gauzy, ethereal mist. Crossing the first hanging bamboo bridge was a bit tricky in the fog. The local people had lashed three pieces of bamboo together for the floor, constructing a swinging tightrope bridge over the fast-running icy waters. It was the first of many such harrowing crossings. We hiked all day through labyrinthine valleys, crisscrossing the many rivers that intertwine as they flow out of the mountains, trudging up and down slippery rock slopes and inching across jagged rock ledges.

Two days later we arrived in Tahundan. Over dinner with the village leader, we spoke about our helicopter trip. He told us that the villagers used to worship the mountain that we almost crashed into. It was home to La, the Spirit of the Mountain, where they had once made sacrifices to ensure a successful hunt.

Over the next few days, Alan held workshops for the biologists and local people on wildlife conservation. We spent many hours around a fire, interviewing local hunters over tea. What animals and how many of them still roamed these mountains? We also questioned them about their trade with the Chinese. Gout was a huge problem for these people. They were trading away red panda skins, musk deer glands, deer horns and hooves, and other animal parts in exchange for precious salt—and for tea. Alan promised to supply them with these staples if they would hunt only for food. Given the difficulty of tracking



Previous page: Dr. Alan Rabinowitz crossing a bamboo and rattan bridge over one of the many rivers that form the headwaters of the Irrawaddy. Left: Tahundan villager (on the right) accepting salt from a Chinese trader in exchange for red panda, red goral, and black barking deer skins. Above: In the Hukuang Valley at a hunting camp two men floated down the river on a bamboo raft. They showed us the bear they had killed. They'd shot it through the gall bladder, which was the part they really wanted, so the price for the bear dropped—they could get only \$8 for these paws.

dwindling wildlife through the punishing mountain terrain, they were eager to accept the deal.

Because of our helicopter "issues," the military requested that we return to Yangon and sent another helicopter to retrieve us. On our return flight, Alan pointed out a sprawling slab of green that spread west to the Indian border—the Hukuang Valley. This so-called Valley of Death was home to animals that had disappeared or were in trouble elsewhere: clouded leopard, sambar and barking deer, elephant, bear, and the second-largest tiger population in Asia. Alan had initiated a WCS camera-trapping project there, gathering wildlife data he hoped would persuade the government to protect the region.

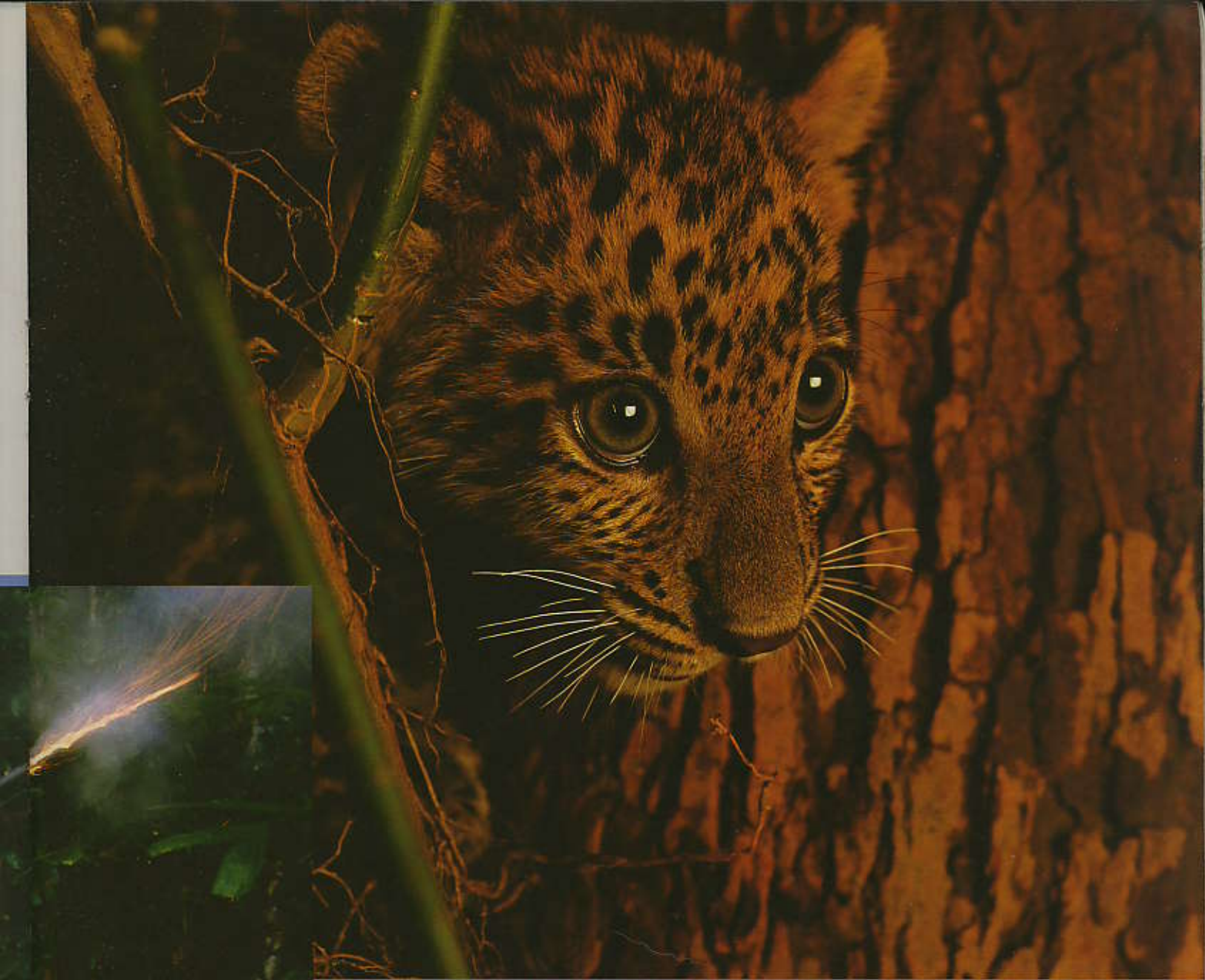


Back at home, I started researching a possible story on the valley for *National Geographic*. There was important news: as a result of Alan's work in the region, the Burmese government designated a 2,494-square-mile area as the Hukuang Valley Wildlife Reserve. But they agreed to triple it if Alan's team could prove the existence of healthy animal populations. This would create the world's largest tiger reserve—an area nearly the size of Vermont. The tigers needed protection. TRAFFIC, an agency that monitors international wildlife trade, estimated that during the 1980s and '90s, between 50 and 100 tigers were poached each year

for use in traditional Asian medicine. Tiger bone is highly sought after as an anti-inflammatory treatment for joint pain. The trade is highly lucrative; a tiger skeleton fetches the equivalent of ten years' salary in Myanmar.

It wouldn't be easy to work there. I was warned by Burmese forestry staff that this area was essentially unexplored. It had been used by local hunters for centuries, but there were no formal trails or villages inside the central valley—which made it the perfect place to photograph. My plan was to trek deep into the jungle to meet up with the joint WCS and Ministry of Forestry "tiger team"—about 35 men plus support staff. They





would spend three consecutive dry seasons there. They'd set up 70 remote cameras to learn which animals—and how many—survived in the valley. The biologists had enlisted the aid of the area's best hunters. These were Lisu tribesmen, who originally came from Hkakabo Razi.

We also needed a team to carry our equipment into the forest. In that part of the country, heavy work is done by elephants. We found four brothers, mahouts with their own elephants. San Hlaing, my fixer, quietly pulled them aside. As mahouts are notorious opium smokers, he told them that they needed to watch their smoking while they were with us.

The next morning we set off along the Tawang River, walking

The trade is highly lucrative: a tiger skeleton fetches the equivalent of ten years' salary in Myanmar.

Above left: Trophy board (inset of macaque skulls)—before the hunter goes into the forest to hunt, he prays to the skulls and the spirit of the animal to give him good luck for the hunt. Left: The weapons the locals use are the crossbow with poison darts and old flintlock muskets from the British army over 100 years old. Above: Orphaned Asiatic leopard cub—the mother was killed by poachers and the cub was eventually confiscated by Forestry officials.





on sandy beaches, rock-hopping through shallows, and fording the waist-high river a dozen times. We crossed fields of elephant grass that reached well over my head. After an hour, we spotted tiger tracks. Stories of hunting tigers on elephants, the beaters yelling and thrashing the tall grasses with bamboo poles, flashed through my head.

By early afternoon of the next day, we made it to the tiger camp, a warren of bamboo platforms raised about a foot off the ground, sheltered by palm roofs. I was greeted by Tony Lynam, who headed the WCS team, and Myint Maung, the reserve's new warden. They helped me formulate a game plan on how to photograph the elusive species that lived there.

It quickly became obvious why this forest had remained pristine. Lynam and others who had recently been in the jungle were covered with blisters, scrapes, and infected leech bites, and they looked dead tired. We presented them with a few gallons of Kachin whiskey, the local moonshine, making us instant members of the team.

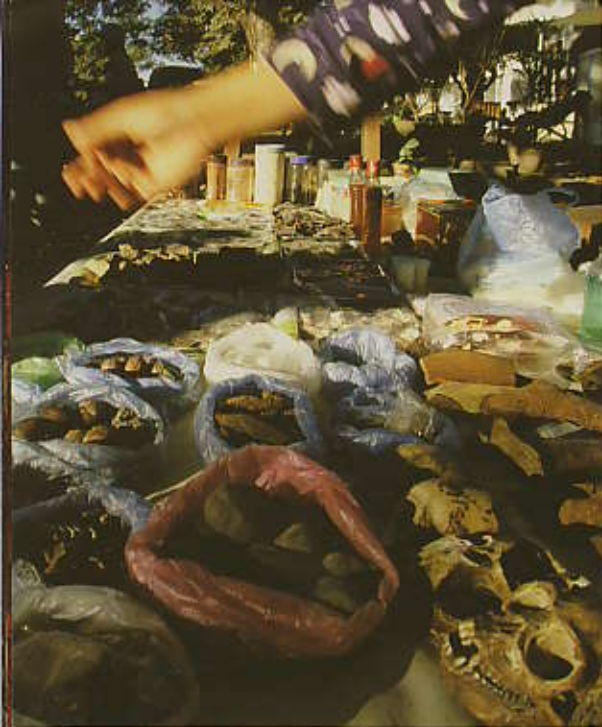
The next day we took a ten-mile "tour" up the river and through the woods to get the lay of the land; the river was by far the best route. Even equipped with my trusty machete, the bamboo and rattan made travel through the forest incredibly slow and difficult. We made it back by dusk and set to work evicting the colonies of leeches that had moved into our pants, shoes, and the backs of our shirts during the day's river crossings—a ritual that became our daily routine. Blood ran down my back and legs after picking them off. Fifteen came off one leg, 13 off the other.

Five miles upriver, we found fresh tiger tracks, just a few hours old. We were led by Ah Puh, who was the most renowned Lisu hunter. He'd probably killed more tigers in the valley than all the other hunters combined. Ah Puh followed the tracks, with me right



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Left: Heading to the tiger camp with all of our equipment carried on three elephants. Above: Setting up a camera trap to photograph the variety of animals in the valley. This trap was set up on the track of a tiger in the hope he would return and be photographed. Myint Maung is the man with the vest on, and he is the chief wildlife warden of the Hukuang Valley.



behind him. As he quickly tiptoed across an open sandy area, I distractedly thought, *Great, he's really excited; hopefully we'll find this tiger.* When I followed him, I was instantly up to my shins. It was quicksand! Ah Puh was about five feet tall and maybe 100 pounds soaking wet, so he'd made it across. I was a husky American weighted down by an additional 40 pounds of camera gear.

I yelled bloody murder and tried to get out, an instinctual but dangerous reaction. The more I struggled, the faster I sank. Within minutes, I was up to my waist. Meanwhile, Ah Puh and the rest of the group

stood watching, absolutely cracking up. After they were done getting their jollies, one of them came over to try to rescue my cameras. He, too, started sinking but immediately fell straight back—obviously the thing to do if you fall into quicksand. Someone threw me a large branch to steady myself, and they ferried my cameras to safety. Using a large piece of bamboo, I slowly worked myself free—managing to keep my boots on. When I got out—after about 20 minutes that felt like a year—I received many pats on the back for having endured this harrowing rite of passage.





I spent every day for three weeks in the forest. I later returned for another two and half months. On my second trip, I knew I needed to document the local indigenous tribes, the devastation caused by gold mining, and the illicit animal trade. The more I could help to increase public knowledge of this unique place, the better the chances of protecting its people and animals. WCS surveys eventually proved that between 80 and 100 tigers prowled the Hukuang Valley, prompting the government to establish the world's largest tiger reserve, forever safeguarding the future of these magnificent creatures. ■

STEVE WINTER has traveled the world as a photographer for National Geographic magazine. His photographs have also appeared in Newsweek, Audubon, and

GEO, among others. Mr. Winter has tracked snow leopards in India, grizzly bears in Siberia, and jaguars in Latin America; explored the entire Irrawaddy River; documented the world's largest tiger reserve in Myanmar; and has traveled throughout the world documenting remote people, places, and elusive animals. His areas of special interest include conservation biology, natural history, marine ecology, and indigenous cultural practices.

SHARON GUYNUP is a science/environmental writer, editor, and photojournalist. Her first book, *State of the Wild 2006: A Global Portrait of Wildlife, Wildlands, and Oceans* was released earlier this year. She has written for *National Geographic.com*, Audubon, *Scientific American*, *Sierra*, and other publications. She lived in Turkey as a Fulbright Scholar and has worked and traveled in Myanmar, Cuba, Russia, India, and Central America. Areas of special interest include indigenous culture and religious practice, conservation biology, natural history, and rain forest ecology.

Above left: Traditional Asian medicine is sold at this table on a street corner in Myitkyina. Most visible to the viewer is elephant skin and tiger bone. Since the Burma Road reopened after 57 years, the trade in macaque skulls has skyrocketed. I asked the locals whether they had hunted monkeys before for anything other than food, and they said no. Left: Epic caravan route—this route goes from the Hukuang Valley up to the north and eventually the Hkakabo Razi region. We saw a few groups of people every week coming up or down this route. It takes them two to three weeks' walking to reach the area. Above: This man with the cheroof is on a raft made from bamboo that he made that day and loaded with all the palm fronds that he has cut to make a roof for his house. He will sell the rest to others who need a new roof or to repair. We had been camped out here for two weeks and never saw anyone. This day we saw this man and the guys who had shot the bear.