

Nature's Keepers: On the Front Lines of the Fight to Save Wildlife in America

Michael Tobias



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Nature's Keepers: On the Front Lines of the Fight to Save Wildlife in America Michael Tobias "What is at issue in the fight to save wildlife is the nature of human commitment, the directions toward which consensus about right and wrong can be mounted. There is an ecology of conscience at work in the human spirit—an instinct, at times blind and groping, to leave as gentle and light a footprint as possible on this earth." — from Nature's Keepers

In this eloquent and moving work, acclaimed nature writer Michael Tobias examines the endangered status of many wild plants and animals, exposes illegal killing by "trophy hunters" in national parks, and shines a spotlight on a worldwide epidemic of poaching and illegal trade in animals and animal parts that threatens many species with extinction. Nature's Keepers highlights some of the thorniest problems involved in the fight to preserve and protect what's left of the wild animals in the United States and, by implication, throughout the world.

Although the battle has already been lost for untold numbers of animals, Tobias focuses on those whose futures might still be preserved. Most Americans, be they urban or rural, are dangerously cut off from an awareness of wild animals and plants and of their threat of extinction. Nature's Keepers offers hope that through education and awareness, legal and judicial diligence, and compassion, some species can be saved and the most dangerous trends reversed.

With its Special Operations unit, agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are among the foot soldiers in the battle to save endangered wildlife—the Green Berets of anti-poaching. Tobias takes us inside their command structure and into the only wildlife crime lab in the world: the Clark Bavin National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory, in Ashland, Oregon, where unique pathology studies and significant DNA blood and tissue matching of wildlife is carried on in an effort to identify illegal kills and their perpetrators. Pulling in more key evidence than is gathered for most murder trials, agents are nonetheless frustrated by laws in many states where parking tickets are more expensive than fines for illegally slaughtering animals.

Although the trade in illegal wildlife is second only to the drug trade in the United States, the wildlife authorities are seriously understaffed, with 7,000 officers in the entire country (across all branches of wildlife law enforcement) versus tens of millions of hunters, dealers, and recreational users—a nearly uncontrollable population of potential abusers spread out over 7.5 million square miles of wildlife habitat. Despite these daunting odds of engagement, Tobias shows how the dedicated members of the USFW Sp. Ops unit mounted such dramatic and successful sting operations as "Whiteout" and "Renegade" in recent years.

What is the future for endangered plants and animals, squeezed not only by a vanishing habitat, but also by an expanding global black market estimated at between \$10 and \$30 billion a year? Tobias demonstrates how energetic citizens may use democratic processes and free enterprise to stem, if not halt, the destruction of wild animals and awaken the "ecology of conscience" in all people, everywhere.

"The list of endangered species in America provides some inkling of the loss of experience with the wild that this history of extinction will have on the next generation of children. They will grow up in a country bereft of Florida panthers (30 to 50 left at this time), Schaus swallowtail butterflies (less than 100 holding on), the Eastern indigo snake (the largest benign snake in North America, number unknown), the red wolf

(population 300), the Wyoming toad (less than 50 surviving), the elegiac whooping crane (their numbers down to 175 in the wild), and many, many others.

"Recognizing the legal, conceptual, and emotional rights of other life-forms as the next great extension of the human community suggests both a spiritual and political transformation. . . . It means a revolution in animal rights, welfare, and protection. . . . It portends a necessary change from mere consumers who expect entitlements, into environmental citizens, whose rights hinge upon responsibilities from one generation to the next."

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Leona Tidwell:

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