

Spectacular Creatures

They Live Among Us



Words and images by Nanticha Ocharoenchai
Layout by Mind Rarunron





Tales passed down from our ancestors tell of an oasis
where live an abundance of fantastical creatures unseen.

Some as bright as the colours of the sea.
Some never to be spotted under the sun.
Some that take cover under slabs and stones.
Some that blend in with the grainy sand.

Some walk with no legs.
Some glide with webbed feet.
Some climb vertically or sleep upside down.
Some grip with minuscule hairs or little limbs.

Some see with four pairs of eyes.
Some see heat and vibration.
Some possess night vision while some glow in the dark.

Some bud.
Some blossom.
Some seed.
Some conceive.
Some raise their young till they're grown.
Some leave them, while others eat them.



Tales we tell of phoenixes and unicorns, mythical beings from our wildest imaginations, long grazed upon the pages of our sci-fi and folklore. But these fabled creatures, in truth, are real. And right now, they roam the same place we reside, a planet called earth — and in fact, in more numbers and kinds than we'll ever count or discover.



Tales passed down from our ancestors tell of an oasis where live an abundance of fantastical creatures unseen.

Some as bright as the colours of the sea. Some never to be spotted under the sun. Some that take cover under slabs and stones. Some that blend in with the grainy sand.

Some walk with no legs. Some glide with webbed feet. Some climb vertically or sleep upside down. Some grip with minuscule hairs or little limbs.

Some see with four pairs of eyes. Some see heat and vibration. Some possess night vision while some glow in the dark.

Some bud. Some blossom. Some seed. Some conceive. Some raise their young till they're grown. Some leave them, while others eat them.

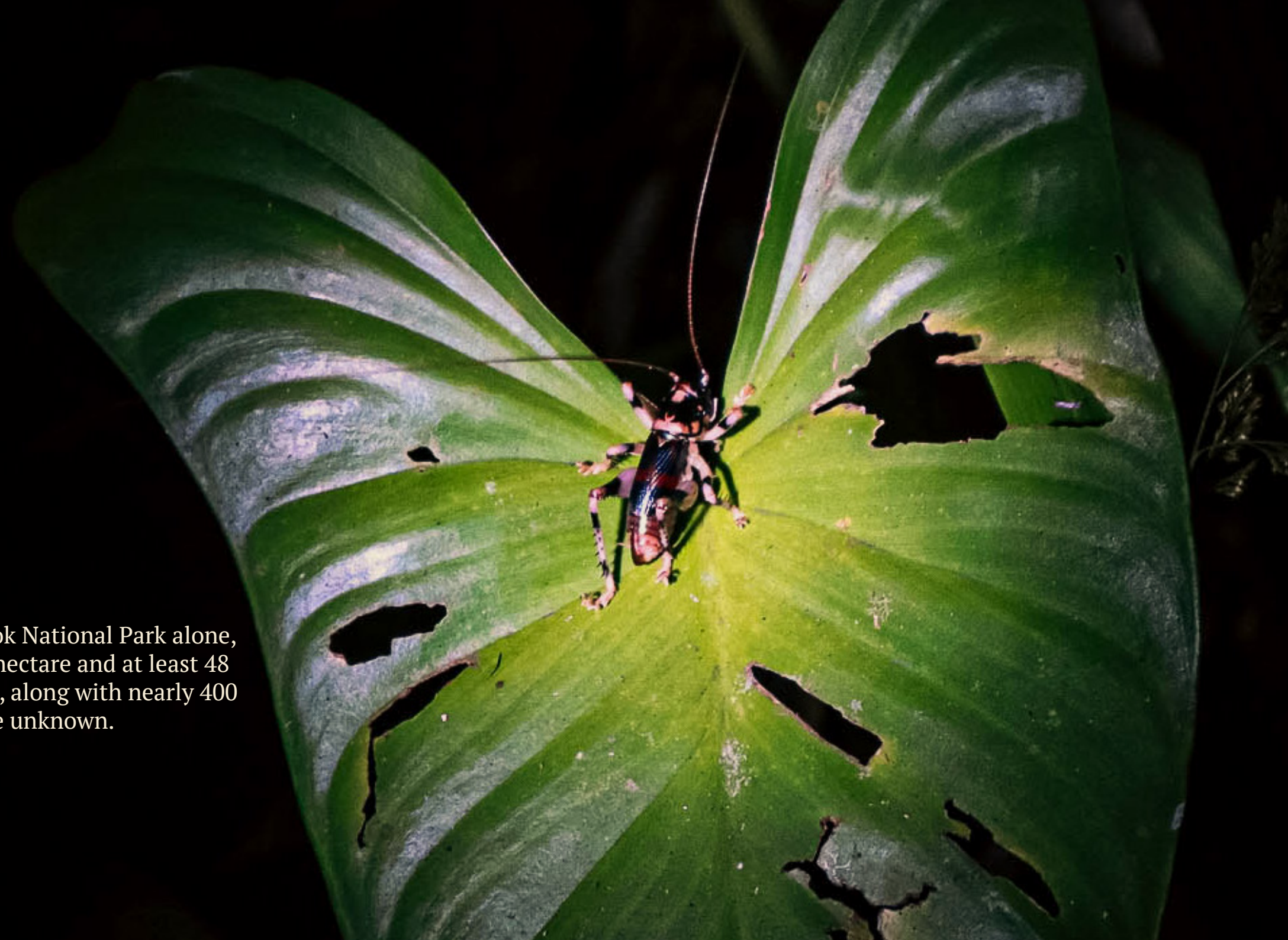
Tales we tell of phoenixes and unicorns, mythical beings from our wildest imaginations, long grazed upon the pages of our sci-fi and folklore. But these fabled creatures, in truth, are real.

Right now they roam the same land we reside, a place called earth, and in fact, in more numbers and kinds than we'll ever count or discover.

Deep in the southern jungles of Thailand's Khao Sok National Park alone, there are known to be about 200 plant species per hectare and at least 48 mammal species within the entirety of its 739 km², along with nearly 400 bird species, over 90 reptile species and many more unknown.

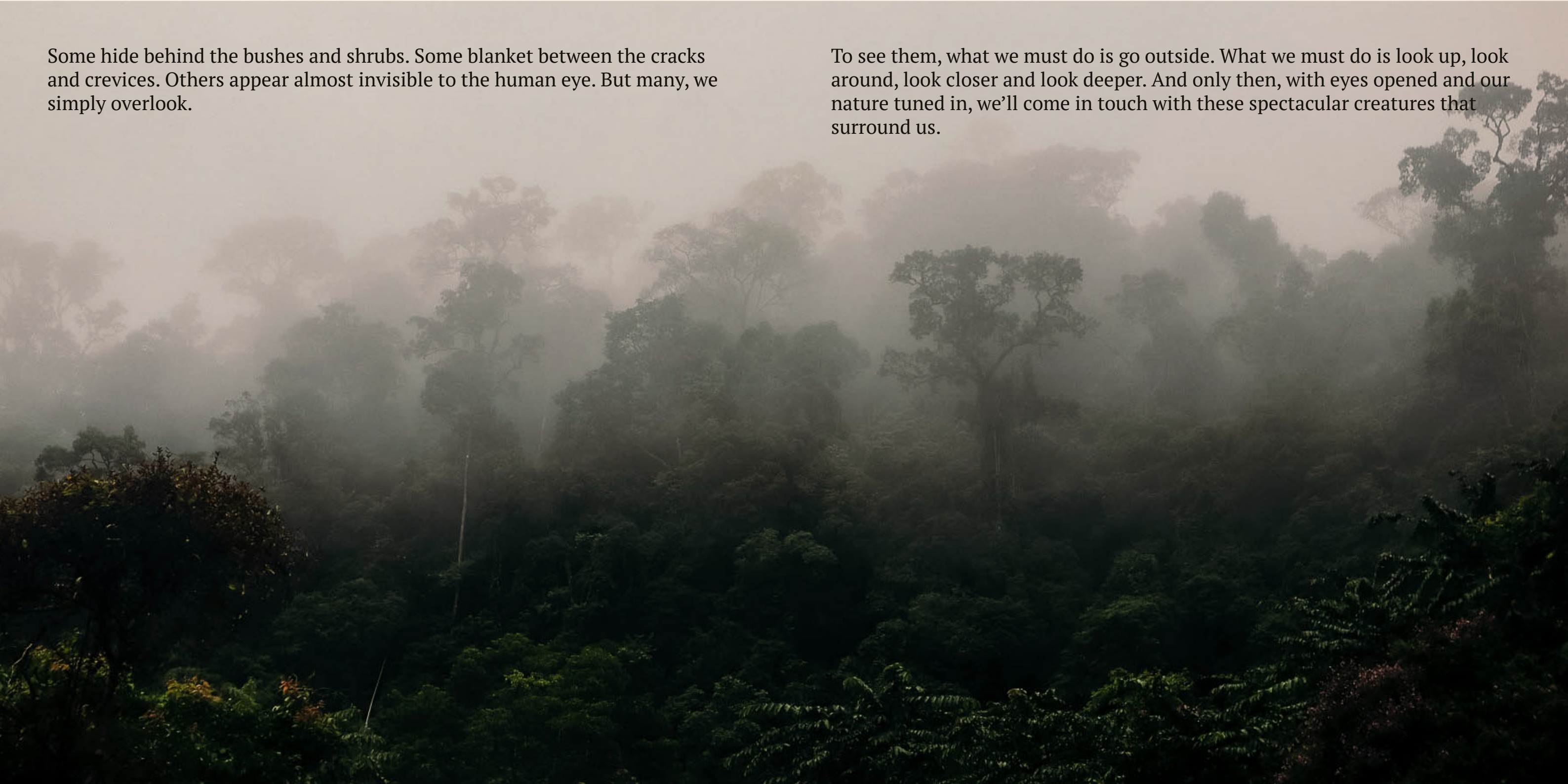
But what do they look like?

Where did they go?



Some hide behind the bushes and shrubs. Some blanket between the cracks and crevices. Others appear almost invisible to the human eye. But many, we simply overlook.

To see them, what we must do is go outside. What we must do is look up, look around, look closer and look deeper. And only then, with eyes opened and our nature tuned in, we'll come in touch with these spectacular creatures that surround us.



Huntsman Spiders

Family Sparassidae

แมงมุมนายพราน

Eight small, round eyes and eight long, hairy legs. Lays eggs of hundreds more heir to continue its lineage. Venom-injecting bites that can immobilise prey and, with few species, even inflict severe pain, headache, vomiting and heart palpitations on humans. Whether under a rock or inside your garage, these creatures, one of the largest kinds of spiders out there, can be found all around – if you look closely, you might see them.



Tenasserim Cascade Frog

Amolops panhai

กบลายหินตะนาวศรี



Lesser Toad

Ingerophrynus parvus

คางคกไฟ





Wagler's Pit Viper

Tropidolaemus wagleri

ບູເຢຍວຖືກແກ

Seemingly sluggish, this venomous creature seems to just hang out on tree branches – for days and even weeks – waiting around for an unfortunate rodent, bird, lizard or frog to pass by. But even at night when they're mostly active, this viper strikes quickly and accurately.

To hunt in the dark, rather than eyes, they use their 'pits' to see heat, detecting temperature differences of as little as 0.003 degree celsius with their infrared vision.

When we stumbled upon it, it calmly slithered off on its way. Oftentimes, snakes are actually more afraid of us than we are of them.



Wallace's Flying Frog

Rhacophorus nigropalmatus

ปาตเซียวตีนดำ

It's a precarious life to live up above in the treetops. Quite a height to fall from. But not for this creature. Though not a bird, it can fly... with legs! With skin stretched between each of its toes, this frog is equipped with a personal parachute, deployable on-demand to catch for an insect or flee from a snake, helping it glide as far as 15 metres and even land softly on the ground.



One of the rangers snatched this frog quickly enough with his speedy hand, giving us a moment to admire its vibrant colours before he gently laid it back on the mud where we found it.







Diadem Roundleaf Bat

Hipposideros diadema

ค้างคาวหน้ายักษ์หมอนโค้ง

We found this creature alone on a tree branch. Not sure where its friends were, but typically these bats love good company, often seen hanging out (upside down) together in big crowds.

Especially throughout the night, they seem extremely chatty with their high-pitched chatter – but that’s actually their hunting. Using echolocation – basically emitting rapid extremely high-frequency calls which bounce off their surroundings and back to their huge ears – they are able to spot beetles, moths and other insects in pitch black (and also not fly into a cave wall or each other).

Rice Field Frog

Fejervarya limnocharis

ဂဟကမ္ဘာ





Bandicoot Berry

Leea indica

ကဲးငံ့ဗို

From its head to its toes, this creature has magical powers which can heal humans of various ailments.

Juice from its leaves can aid digestion once drunk and remedy dizziness when applied to the head. Pounded leaves, placed on the skin, can alleviate cut wounds. Young shoots, chewed up, can relieve severe coughs. Roots, crushed up and concentrated, can treat anything from fevers and muscular pain to diarrhoea and intestinal cancer.

Both a pharmacy and a doctor in a single plant.



Curry Tree

Murraya koenigii

கரூங்காய்

If not for the existence of this creature, the Indian cuisine might have a hole in its heart. Though not to be mistaken with curry powder, fresh leaves from this tree are widely used in southern and western Indian cooking and highly prized as seasoning in other South and Southeast Asian countries. It is also known to possess superpowers in making people hungry but also eat and digest well, much like a loving mother does.

■ Growth



For the past four and half billion years, nature has so created, crafted, shaped and moulded all of her artworks in wise, creative, resourceful, patient, and resilient manner.

Each is unique, every single one equipped with its own means and mechanisms to find their own place in the world, survive and thrive upon the terra throughout each era.



How many of them really?

Could be millions, could even be billions. Most likely a trillion, but we'll never know. So far, only over a million have been seen by mankind, each different in colour, shape, size, habit, feature and form.

Some bear fruits, bud leaves, spring and sprout, are raised in soil and rise to the sun. Some grab with vines, climb with roots, breathe through fins or fly with limbs.

From one generation to another, they learn and adapt, and through a millennia on to the next, tried and tested. When change is the only constant, only with wisdom passed from parents to their young, will growth ensue and challenges be overcome.



Elephant Apple

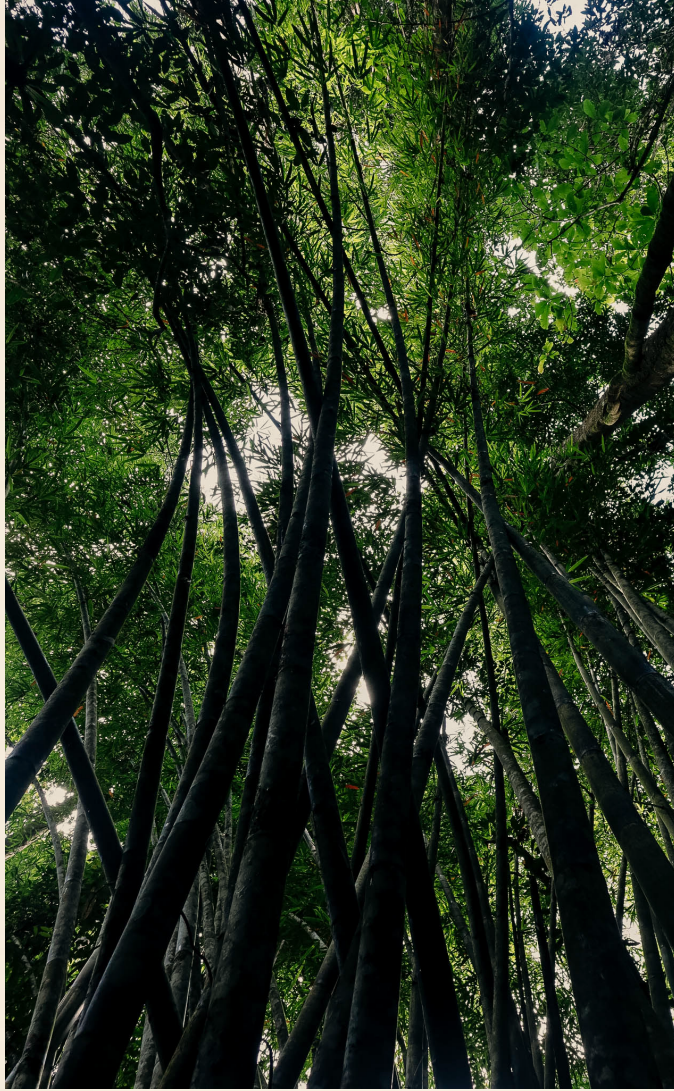
Dillenia indica

မင်းကလေး

This tree bears a large hard fruit that can only be eaten by large animals (or cooked into jams, curries, drinks and medicines by humans). A favourite delicacy of the Asian elephant, they greatly rely upon them to spread their seeds around the forest.

But as these majestic giants gradually disappear from the forests, faced by a multitude of threats like habitat fragmentation and poaching, these trees are learning and adapting to continue their lineage with or without the help of their animal friend.

Over time, they've developed a mechanism in which their fruits now slowly soften on the forest floor, allowing for smaller animals like macaques, rodents and squirrels to easily eat them and also increasing their chance of germination.



Tribe Bambuseae

Bamboo

Tw

These versatile creatures are the fastest growing plants on land, and are, in fact, grass (not trees). The nutrient-dense leaves they drop, once decomposed, go on to feed itself through the soil as well as all other bamboo and plants surrounding





Jungle Flame

Ixora coccinea

ดอกเข็ม



Begonias

Genus Begonia

กะดังใบ

This creature produces one of the smallest types of seeds in the world, some almost as fine as specks of dust. Just an ounce in your palm can hold up to three million seedlings of potential new life.



Shampoo Ginger

Zingiber zerumbet

กะทือป่า

Rumours of this creature's elixir has been spread across many kingdoms, its powers known to solve a multitude of everyday problems faced by humankind.

In Malaysia, it is used to cure stomach aches, diarrhoea and loss of appetite, in the Philippines for asthma and rheumatism and in India, for toothache, cough and countless other ailments. In China, it gets people drunk and stimulated. In India, it is used in perfumes. In Hawaii, it is used as shampoo and hair conditioner, as well for flavour in food. In Brunei, it alleviates mothers after childbirth. In New Guinea, it serves spiritual rituals.

Truly a magical plant.







Cookeina sulcipes

เห็ดถ้วยแชมเปญ

One of the rangers spotted this vivacious creature from afar, resembling it as a ‘champagne glass’ as its name goes in Thai.

When it rains, this mushroom actually holds water in its ‘cup’, which then puts pressure on the asci which hold its spores. As the water gradually evaporates, the asci dries out and releases the pressure, freeing the spores to spread and expand the mushroom’s territory far and wide.

Microporus affinis

เห็ดขอนพัดเหลืองขอบขาว

Even once it falls and begins to deteriorate, a tree branch continues its succession, giving a birthplace to new creatures like fungi. In nature, life never ceases to exist.

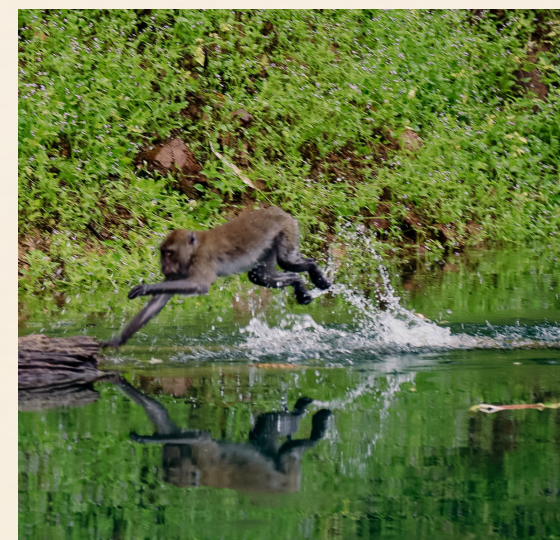
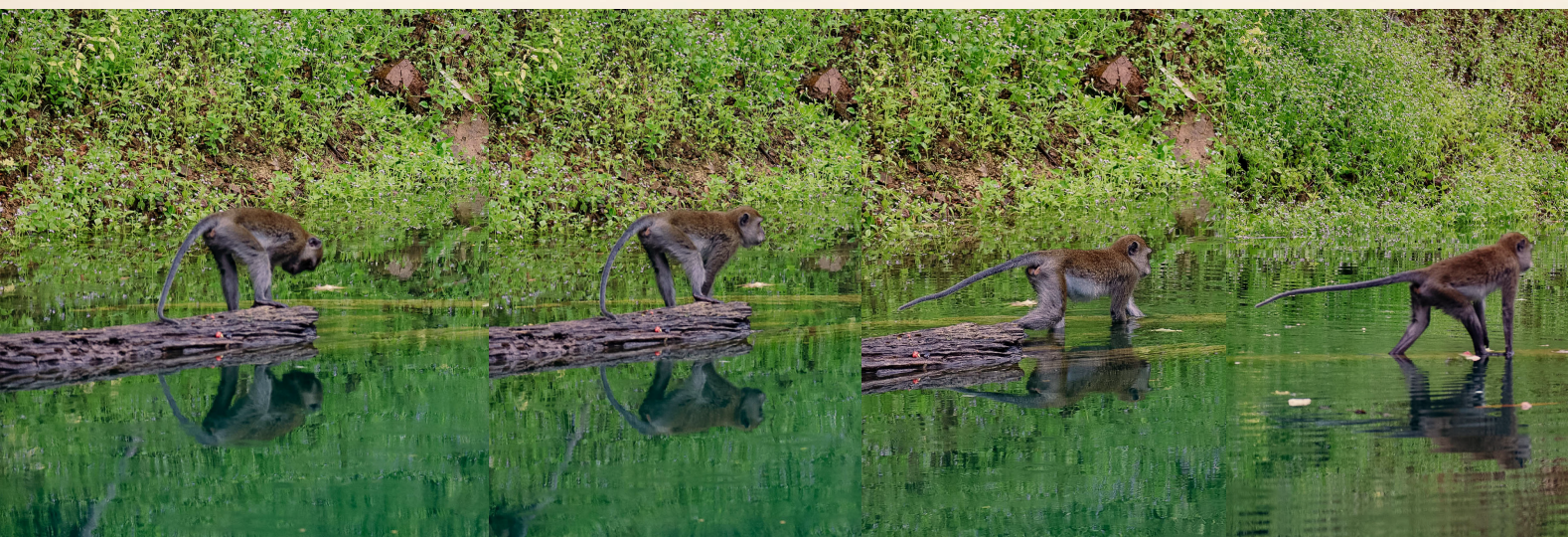








Learned through the experience of its ancestors, this tree has evolved to live in flooded forests by elevating their roots above the ground in order to breathe air where the soil is waterlogged.



Trial and error.

Learning by doing.

That is how we all grow.



Common Four-Ring

Ypthima huebneri

ผีเสื้อสี่ตาลจุดตาสี่รรสมดา

With yellow-black spots on their wings, these tiny, fragile creatures smartly use their pattern to confuse predators.

From a small egg, hatched into a springy caterpillar, huddled into a cosy pupa, then finally transpiring as a glorious butterfly, its transformation is a poetic embodiment of growth and emergence.

Penelope's Hill Frog

Clinotarsus penelope

กบภูเขาสูง

This creature – now fully capable of springing, gripping, bouncing and pouncing off of trees and through the air – started life as a squiggly tiny tadpole swimming in vast waters.





Dipterocarpus kerrii

ยางมันहु

“ลูกไม้หล่นไม่ไกลต้น” goes a Thai version of the proverb “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”. Indeed, this creature’s seed will spin down in a swift flight and land not too far away from its mother.

One of the most important commercial species in Thailand, this tree is used for various purposes, from construction with its timber to paints and medicines with its resin.



■ Community

Like a tight-knit family, rooted and intertwined in a loving embrace, trees of same kin share what they need with each other, whether water, nutrients, signals and chemicals. And when one falls, it gives itself back into the ground it was grown from. Its trunk offers space for new life to flourish, while its bark provides fertile soil for others to feed. With an affectionate shade now gone and the skies opened up, buried seeds and spores now soak in the sun's rays and spring into pioneers of their own.



First visits the ant, who feeds on the fruit. Next comes the lizard, who munches on the ants. What might follow could be a snake or a hawk then a predator much bigger, and bigger and bigger. And each and every one of them, all special in their role, with indispensable contributions to their ecosystem and society.

Some share with and care for while others take from and compete with. Bonds that take disadvantage, and relationships symbiotic in their will. With each storm that passes, fresh lichen born upon historic rocks as they weather. Like the hornbill couple and their lifelong company, orchids, too, cling to one another.

If there was one thing we could learn from nature, it'd be how we could coexist together.



Help each other grow, cling on to one another, huddle together, embrace, support, share, care for, give and take – there's much we can learn from these creatures about what it takes to be a good friend and neighbour.









Jaggery Palm

Caryota urens

เต่าร้าง

Once ripe, the fruits of this tree turns ruby red in colour and nourishes a whole diverse community of wildlife in the forest.



But it's not all sunshine and roses in a community – some eat while others are eaten.



Brahminy Kite

Haliastur indus

ไถ่ຍ်ວူດ

Like some of our kind, this creature is known to carry a bad habit much disliked by the rest of its community: stealing. Called ‘kleptoparasite’ in the animal world, this raptor sometimes steals fishes from other birds and even Irrawaddy dolphins, swiftly snatching their prey during flight.



Asian Palm Civet

Paradoxurus hermaphroditus

อีเห็นข้างลาย

We were lucky to spot this timid creature during our night walk. With our headlamps shone on it, it briskly scrambled off on the branches to hide, so we quickly turned our lights off to give it back its peaceful time for midnight snacks.

Figs, palms, mangoes, bananas, papayas, nectar, rats, birds, insects, worms, eggs, reptiles, snails, scorpions and more – this creature eats whatever is available. And while it's not picky, its favourite, though, are pulpy fruit and berries.

And with a diet full of such variety, the civet plays a vital role in growing a rich, biodiverse forest by carrying and dispersing seeds far away from where it first ate them – by its poop. And it is also from this poop, where the finest and most expensive coffee in the human world is born.



Common Clubtail

Losaria coon

ผีเสื้อหางตุ้มหางท้าว

As this creature drinks nectar from each flower it visits, it helps carry pollen from one flower to another, helping various kinds of plant reproduce across the range.

And though slow in flight, this butterfly isn't too worried about predators. Pretty to the human eye, the distinctive black and red markings on this creature's wing screams danger to its predators, showing signs of inedible chemicals derived from the plants it used to feed on as a caterpillar.





Green Metalwing

Neurobasis chinensis

แมลงปอเข้มน้ำตกจีน

Perhaps out of a romance fairytale, these creatures form a heart shape while mating.

During their lovemaking, the bodies of the male and female come together and conjoin, their structures fitting into each other like jigsaw puzzles. Amidst this, they can even fly around in tandem, and depending on species, may stay together throughout the whole egg-laying process to follow.





Great Hornbill

Buceros bicornis

นกเงือก

There's much about love we can learn from these creatures. Typically monogamous, hornbills are known to stick with one partner for life. Therefore, chicks grow up in a warm, loving family in which their parents will stay together to raise it until it matures.

Hornbill couples will spend several days searching for the right tree hollow where the female will lay her eggs. Once inside, the mother will seal herself up with regurgitated food, faeces and mud brought to her by her counterpart, creating a predator-proof nest for her soon-to-hatch babies. Throughout the wait, the father will bring her food, feeding her through the slit until their younglings are fully grown.

After a few months, the chicks are ready to leave their nest. Even then, both parents will continue to teach them until they learn how to find their own food.





Greater Coucal

Centropus sinensis

ບຸກຄະປູດໃກລຸຍ

This creature makes calls that can sound like a rapid rattling *lottok, lottok* a booming low *coop-coop-coop* or a harsh scolding *skeeeaw* but only its friends and lovers would understand what that all means.

Monogamous in nature, greater coucals use these calls to find mates. During courtship, a male typically chases the female and brings her food gifts. Should the female be impressed, she'll lower her tail and droop down her wings as a sign of approval.

Long-tailed Macaque

Macaca fascicularis

ลิงหางยาว

This creature and its social circle will remind us most of us and our family. With up to eight individuals in a group, macaques need each other to survive, watching out for each other's backs and keeping the crew safe from predators.

However, just like us and our loved ones, sometimes tensions can arise, sometimes in a fight over food or a feud over lovers. But just like us, they eventually find ways to resolve the conflict and come to terms with one another to keep the family together, whether by grooming or letting go of one's ego.



■ Home



Ushered by the same force of nature that gave rise to the peaks of the Himalayas, came to be born the hills and valleys of Khao Sok. Believed to be as ancient as the rainforests of the Amazon, this place itself once resembled our Garden of Eden, the genesis of all our fascinating beings.

But like the tales of Noah's Arc, one day, came a big catastrophic flood that caused great devastation. In 1987, a hydroelectric dam was constructed and Khao Sok's valleys were submerged. Some animals fled and some were rescued, while others drowned and disappeared. Many plants perished, leaving behind only remnants seen shooting up from the surface of the still waters today.

Where native communities once roamed and indigenous wildlife once walked, foreign fishes now swim and modern boats now float. While not anything like the Eden it used to be, not anywhere near the richness it once possessed, this place is where an abundance of wildlife still thrive.



Family Cicadidae

Cicada

จักจั่น

From this chimney in the ground, one of the loudest creatures in the world emerges from its birthplace.

Cicadas begin their lives as eggs, laid by their mothers, typically in the bark of a tree. Once they hatch into nymphs, they drop to the forest ground and burrow as deep as 2.5 metres underground. This is where they'll spend the most of their entire lives, feeding off sap from plant roots. Depending on the species, some cicadas will call this deep, dark hole their home for up to 17 years.

And when the time and temperature is just right, they emerge from the ground as fully-grown adults, often as massive phenomenal swarms that can generate a powerful reverberating chorus, deafening to the human ear even.





Pointing at this fan of palm leaves, a ranger told us that this is a creature's home. By nibbling down the stems of each branch, bats construct a resting canopy for them to hang down from.



A leaf is not simply a leaf – it can be a home for any ingenious creature. It is what you make out of it, and the ants seem to have made the best.





Giant Huntsman Spiders

Heteropoda maxima

แมงมุมนายพรานยักษ์

As hundreds of spiderlings await to be born, now still carried in a flat egg sac under the embrace of their mother, the soon-to-be father is seen in their home in the hollow of a bamboo culm. But the fate of the family is unclear – once the eggs hatch, the female may cannibalistically eat the male... and if they stay around too long, perhaps even their newborns.



Abandoned-web Orb-Weaver

Parawixia dehaani

แมงมุมสวนท้องสามเหลี่ยม

During our night walk through the forest, the beams from our headlamps glanced over some gleaming white threads rippling in the pitch black. Upon closer inspection, it was a little eight-legged creature dancing mid-air, spewing and spinning fine stretchy strings to form what was, after a few more seconds, unveiled to be an intricate pattern – her home and hunting ground.

Mostly at night, this species of spider weaves spiral wheel-shaped webs – with open sections here and there, seemingly damaged and thus giving it the moniker ‘abandoned-web’ – to trap their food, which primarily consists of moths. As the little creature whirled drew its latticework out from thin air, all I could do was stare, watch and wow.



The Garden of Eden exists not too far away from us.

But as more land is paved and more forests are cleared for wider roads and taller skyscrapers, the once crystal clear waters are have become murky and the stars have now gone. Many rare and most threatened, though once plenty these spectacular creatures are today swiftly chopped and needlessly hunted. From lives with their own living, they have become mere pets and apartment furnishings.

And as they dwindle to the few surviving of their kind, it takes those with a good pair of eyes to spot and a good heart to save. Humbly paid and poorly acknowledged, many rangers along with many local communities and indigenous peoples are as overlooked as the wildlife they help to conserve.

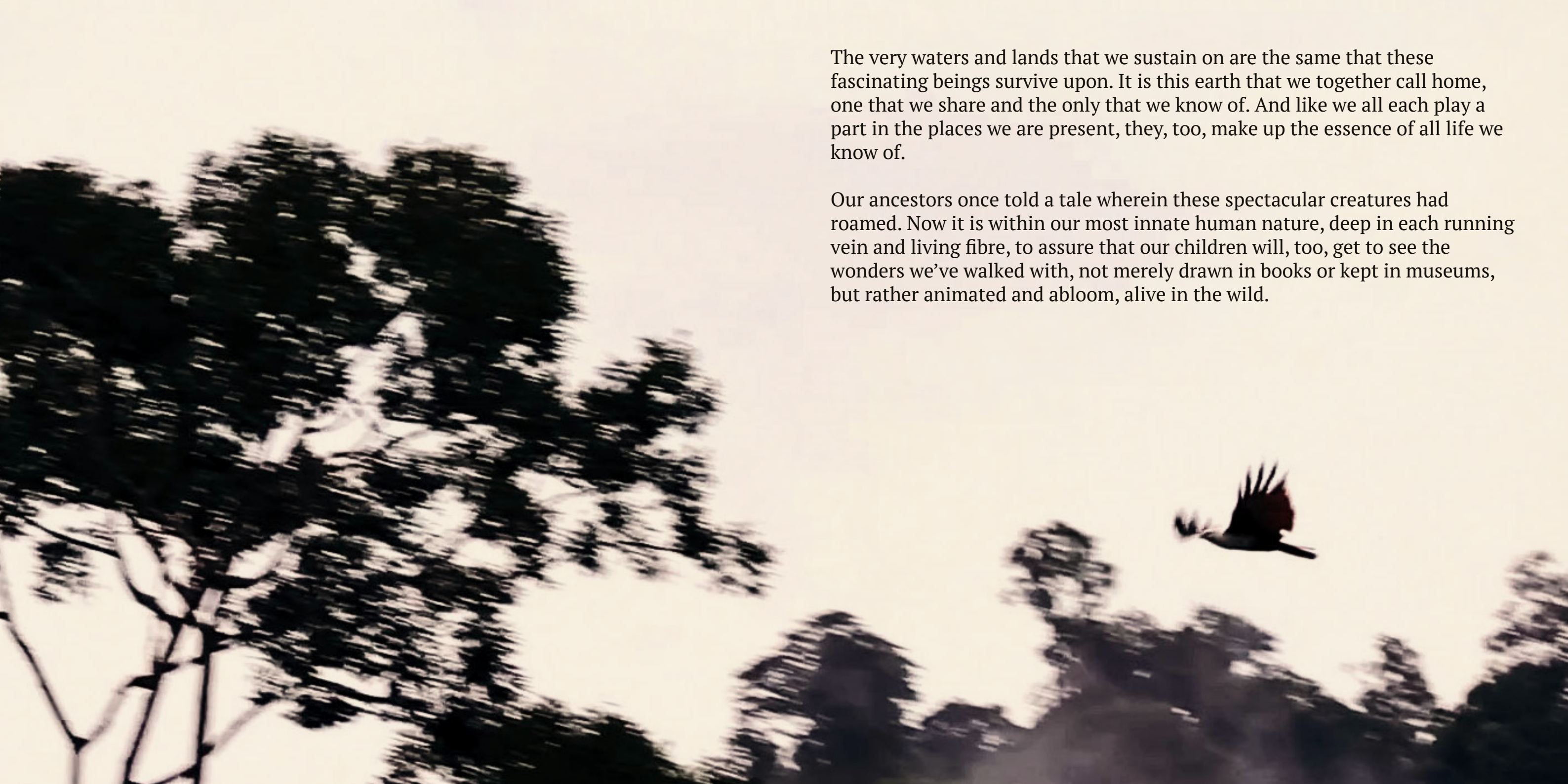
A few whose lives have been taken, and a few others who have taken their own. Worn boots and torn trousers, days of patrola through dense jungles and nights half asleep in wet hammocks, most tirelessly do all they do with moral duty to protect this remaining beauty.











The very waters and lands that we sustain on are the same that these fascinating beings survive upon. It is this earth that we together call home, one that we share and the only that we know of. And like we all each play a part in the places we are present, they, too, make up the essence of all life we know of.

Our ancestors once told a tale wherein these spectacular creatures had roamed. Now it is within our most innate human nature, deep in each running vein and living fibre, to assure that our children will, too, get to see the wonders we've walked with, not merely drawn in books or kept in museums, but rather animated and abloom, alive in the wild.

This photo essay was made possible with the support of:



Implemented by



Small Grants Programme
by the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity
German Financial Cooperation
KfW No. BMZ 2011 66 545 (SGP)
KfW No. BMZ 2015 69 177 (SGP II)

