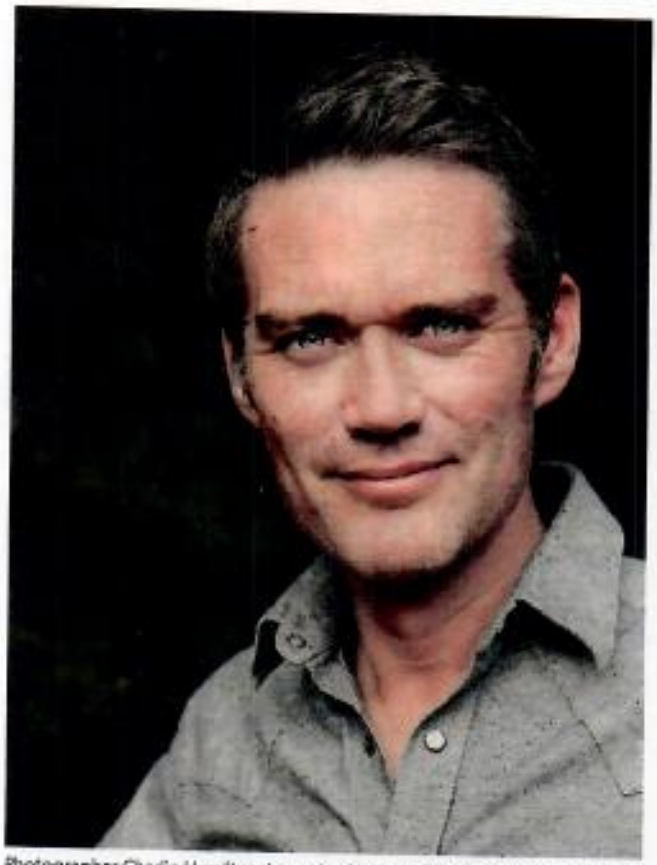
CHARLIE HAMILTON JAMES

Isolated and at Risk: Peoples of the Amazon

BY SUSAN GOLDBERG

One of the most challenging aspects of storytelling at *National Geographic* is introducing our readers to people and cultures they've never seen before. It's a beautiful part of our 130-year history but also an ethical minefield: What's our responsibility in telling the stories of those who, at least outwardly, seem so different from us? How do we cover cultures sensitively, without "exoticizing" or romanticizing what's natural for them?



Photographer Charlie Hamilton James is a National Geographic Society fellow.

'IF YOU STRIP AWAY YOUR PRECONCEPTIONS, IT'S A FAR MORE HONEST WAY OF CONVEYING WHAT PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY LIKE.'

This month's cover story, on grave threats to the indigenous people who live in the Brazilian and Peruvian Amazon, brings this subject into high relief. Our photographer, Charlie Hamilton James, spent a month with indigenous groups such as the Awá and Guajajara people; overall, he has spent a year and a half in the Amazon. We talked about the challenges and responsibilities of taking photos in this setting.

***Goldberg:* Some of the people you took pictures of in the Brazilian and Peruvian Amazon have little contact outside of their own communities. How do you approach people in situations like this?**

Hamilton James: You can go in with two mind-sets: You can go in to show how different people are, or you can go in to show how similar we all are. If you go in to show how different we are, what you tend to show is exaggerated bits of the culture, and you can see that in the imagery—it exoticizes people, it romanticizes them. My interest is in photographing some fellow human beings, and I'm really interested in how similar we all are. I just want to show people living as people live, in the most honest way I can.

Do you think you can capture the truth of what's happening in these people's lives? You didn't grow up among them. And not to put too fine a point on it, but you're a

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PHOTO: WARWICK SLOSS

THIS INTERVIEW WAS EDITED FOR LENGTH AND CLARITY.

Hamilton James describes this photo shot by an aide traveling with him: "I'm surrounded by several families of Awá people while they cook a breakfast of caiman, peca, and porcupine, which the men hunted in the forest the night before." The caiman and peca were killed with bow and arrow, he said, and "the porcupine was stolen off a jaguar that they found eating it."

six-foot-four white guy, and these are smaller people living in the forest. It's pretty hard for you to fade into the woodwork, as it were.
That's true, but actually, if you spend enough time, you do fade into the woodwork. At the same time, you're also getting to know people. You can't communicate with language, but what's really weird is we can laugh about the same things, even if we can't talk.

So you feel like you're trying to be around people and just capture their humanity, the same way you would people in New York?
Absolutely. The other day I was photographing cowboys branding cows, and I approached that situation in no different way than I approach tribal people in the Amazon. To me it's exactly the same. I haven't come with any preconceptions, and I think that's helped me. We've gone for hundreds of years into these remote places, and we've confirmed and reconfirmed these ideas of what these people should be. And most of them are wrong. If you strip away your preconceptions, and just go and hang out with the people and take pictures, I think it's a far more honest way of conveying what people are actually like.

One of the pictures I really liked shows the villagers with their turtles (pages 44-45), bathing them in the river, and I thought that was the most charming photograph. I can't speak for the turtles, as I hear some of them become dinner—but the people are laughing and obviously enjoying themselves. They let you into that scene.
There was no barrier at all. That was a couple of days in; everyone was just relaxed with me, we're all having fun, so I'm just wandering around in my underpants in the river, taking these pictures. They're all laughing at me. It was the most photogenic and beautiful experience I've ever had. One of the reasons I like it is because everyone's laughing. Nowadays, we tend to show the miserable side of indigenous life in the Amazon: The trees are being cut down, everything's bad, and we show these people with sad faces. The world is threatening—but they still have fun, and I was really keen to show that.

We try to make sure we're telling stories that are relevant and urgent. This feels like one of those stories.
Isolated people living in the Amazon are being threatened by a number of serious issues. It's a very important story because it's happening more and more, and the number of isolated people and tribes is shrinking. What do you do? How do you mitigate a disaster unfolding? Everyone's doing the best they can, including us covering it.

PHOTO: MARCO JOSE LIMA