

Where are you from?

I grew up in New Hampshire, in the eastern United States. I spent my summers working for the local vegetable farm. As a family we spent much of our free time either hiking in the woods and climbing mountaintops. I'd grown up in a rural area where there were still dirt roads and subdivisions were not yet part of the dictionary. I spent a lot of my time gathering firewood, catching frogs, and spotting birds with my Grandfather.

The American West and its surfaces first captivated me when I drove across the country when I was eighteen years old. I had a Pentax K1000 camera, I camped in ghost towns, closed campsites, made fires, and learned how to grow a beard. I was introduced to coyotes; on one journey a hungry bear tore the door off my small Toyota. Today, the west symbolizes home and a deep longing for me. Work in Southeast Asia has made me value open spaces, parklands, and realize that the lines between what is saved and what becomes developed is increasingly fine. In graduate school the forests and land in Montana were also kind to me. The forest gave me a roof, images, food, and even a firewood salvage business. The people who gave me access to land have been kind as I've developed my technique and cultivated my vision of understanding both forestlands and myself. Because of this, I usually say I'm from Montana, just south of the Canadian Border.

What first switched you on to forests?

So, it was the geography of my childhood that switched me on to forests. It was all we had. When the family dog would escape, I'd chase him through the forests, sometimes for hours and carry him back home. And in college I worked as a mountain guide and cook in the Appalachian Mountains. I spent one season in the mountains of California teaching middle school kids biology, geology, botany, and environmental education. Many of these kids were rough kids. At night I'd sometimes find knives or pepper spray with them in their bunks. But the mountains and forest transformed them. It transformed me. I even made friends with a local mountain man. Special places can transform anyone. And that's where I suppose I first began to feel more at home in forests.

It's funny. I used to have this major fear of walking in the forest at night. The wind, animals darting through the forest would terrify me. We used to lead these night hikes for middle school kids that would terrify them to death. After walking through the forest we'd have them do solo walks of about 100 meters or so. They'd be terrified to death. I got comfortable hiking at night and trusting my senses. Hiking in the rainforest at night is a different story, with leeches, fire ants, and even an occasional snake that fell from the canopy on me once, but it's still a lot of fun to be out at night, taking in the forest. And in the tropics at night, you never know what you'll see. A surprise is around every corner, just like life!

What were your first real forest experiences?

One transformative experience happened just before I was sixteen years old. I won a local scholarship for a fourteen day Outward Bound wilderness trip in the remote wilderness of Maine. During that time, I camped solo for the first time, learned to canoe, brave storms, and all of my skills like making fires and knot tying and setting up tarps I perfected. These are important life skills.

Anyway, one on of the last days I was leading the group for the day. At a crucial river junction, I mis-navigated and cost our group a day of travel. That night, we were forced to make camp on a rocky outcrop with limited shelter. It stormed badly. I remembered feeling my first feelings of guilt. I remember thinking, 'I'm really not good at this leadership thing. I can't be reliable in these situations, where people are counting on me.'

But, later that night, I got the fire started. I remember making up this crazy chant that I teach a lot of Malaysian kids in the forest communities I visit. I learned that I don't know everything, I learned to admit more of my mistakes, I learned that I being in uncomfortable positions where people want answers is natural. I vowed to be a life long learner. Having that kind of experience in a forest with people you don't know to well is a good place to build from.

I believe we live in a time when we leaders more than ever. A lot of people write me, wanting to join me. I sometimes write back letting folks know that they might be getting more than they bargained for! In Malaysia, I often concentrate on working with people who have vast amounts of knowledge about the forest. Getting to these places is sometimes difficult, usually requiring a combination of 4wds, long boats, the occasional logging truck, and lots of walking and perseverance. I have this funny habit of showing up to a lot of communities soaking wet. This used to really bother me – being cold and wet isn't fun – but I've learned to dress warmer, have extra plastic raincoats handy, and just embrace the situation of being soaking wet. Sometimes you just have to laugh and remember that the journey is part of the adventure. What's exciting is that now that I'm establishing myself in Malaysia, it's only the beginning.

Because of this attitude, some of my Malaysia friends have told me that they see me as a leader. But I'm just here to work with others, to be in this great journey together, to learn what we can from one another, and to spend as much time in forest communities as possible.

When did began to see their significance [of forest-based communities]?

I've tried lots of jobs but I've always returned to working with forests and people. It's just something I can't help. Someone recently asked me if I'd consider moving to Singapore. My first response was, 'There are no forest communities.' It's what I'm close to. Forests are what make part of a home for me.

What were your first encounters with indigenous people?

In 1999 I worked as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was placed on a remote island. I spent some weeks doing resource mapping and making portraits of indigenous people. It was there that I first learned how to properly use a machete. I also began developing all of my own film using a changing bag and drying my film in a tent. I grew a lot; those people taught me a lot about the forest, themselves, and more about myself than I know. I made dozens of friends. I'm indebted to them. I returned to work with some of them for my master's in Forestry. My undergraduate is Anthropology. I think it's a good combination for working here, but every day I'm learning something.

Subsequent relations you have built with the forest people

I've also done work with forest communities in Mexico, Thailand, The Bahamas, and Indonesia. I've returned to many of these places to do some participatory photography projects. I've also worked with some rough loggers in the wilds of Montana. A lot of them have told me that they call themselves Indigenous. Loggers in Montana are diverse and, just like people here, have a range of experience and knowledge. As a group, they are pretty good at asking the question, who's land is this? Who has use rights? Who has access? Who has power? And those are good important dialogs that forest communities – indigenous or not—need to be having.

What you admire about [forest communities]?

I admire strength, courage, intuition, life long learners, the ability of someone to lead, laugh, learn and make stories. People who find joy in the cycles of planting and harvesting. It's everything I admire. Some of these people are heroes to me. It keeps me coming back. I told one medicinal planter that his ideas give me roots, like a tree. I mean that.

And your concerns?

I am concerned about people's access to knowledge, land, and rights. I'm concerned that people's voices are not always heard over the hum of rapid development. This is a general concern. It's a concern for people everywhere. Part of my challenge is to identify the real forest experts. I seek teachers. I seek people who want to talk, who believe there is hope.

I've found these kind of teachers from professors, guides, communities, indigenous people, businessman and woman, and people within the Malaysian government whom I've corresponded with.

I guess this is a good place to out myself and say that I'm no Bruno Manser. I'm not an activist; I'm a connector. I'm in love with people and their stories about forest knowledge. I love Malaysia and forests here so much that I want to help cultivate productive dialogs. Because of the development and the tensions, this is an exciting place to work.

How did you first get into photography?

Photography is a window to another world, it is a vehicle for finding this knowledge and building relations. When I was in third grade I'd walk from the elementary school to the high school where my Dad taught the high school yearbook. I'd spend my afternoons in the darkroom with the high schoolers printing in the darkroom. It was great, um, exposure. Sorry about the bad joke.

Long before that I had my own viewfinder camera. I made pinhole cameras for fun. I was an addict. My first big project with people involved remote communities living off the last forested islands in Maine. I'd lug a 4x5 20 kilo camera through the mud flats in Maine and hitch rides on lobster boats to make it to these places.

I started early about the relations required to build and make intimate images. It's a constant process of self-discovery.

What was the first shot that was noticed, that gave you confidence?

Gosh. I don't remember anyone ever saying this. Maybe in more recent years.

But I don't think it would matter if no one liked the images! These days I solely make images that I believe capture the intimate knowledge of people. These are in moments of a lot of change. This is important work, but often the backstory of the image – and what I learn through the journey of a good image – is just important as the image. For example, I recently made a portrait of a woman holding medicinal plants in her home garden. I visited her three times over the course of three weeks.

The mood was always wrong until the fourth time I visited. We needed that time to build relations and trust. I needed to learn to see her. And we needed to have a dialog about image making together. That's kind of a secret; I make images with people, when I'm working solo and in workshops with communities. People

are not subjects, they are partners. We're all making images together. I believe this so much that I hold the copyright of images jointly with partners under a program called a Creative Commons copyright license. You can find out more about this on the website.

How did you learn?

When am I not learning? I've learned with the support of my photographer, grandfather, and my Uncle. My father. Others I admire; there are countless photographers and artists who live by example. These are all personal heroes and role models. I also studied photography in college. I've had a lot of support from friends. I'm always learning. Here, I grow a lot by corresponding with other image makers and creators. Photograph growth requires feedback and producing real prints. So I'm doing what I can to cultivate a community that supports this in the region.

Leading a photographic life, as I like to call it, takes a lot of time and dedication. It never stops.

When did it get serious?

I've always been pretty serious! Maybe the question should be, 'When did people start taking me seriously?'

I can't tell you how many people who have *encouraged* me to give up along the way. 'Noah, you've got to give up. You've got to put your camera down. You've got to get a real career. You are always talking about images and stories.' I've never really listened.

So, these days, I'm learning to be more succinct with what I do. I need to be, because sometimes I need to explain this in Bahasa! Organizations and communities need to see that I'm serious about this. So, this is photography with a mission. The images are less about me and more about what we craft with together. This takes a lot of planning and support. We've established an organization that will help communities document their knowledge, thoughts, and voice.

So now, I've learned to use the word WE. I've found a whole bunch of people who want to help in this cause. So, we are in the process of putting together a mission, vision, by-laws and a board of directors so we can have access to outside funding. This mission involves using all the latest tools and technologies to that are nice to have when it comes to cultivating productive dialog.

It's an exciting time when beliefs are put into practice. We need help and support. But images can change the world. Images can help cultivate a dialog within, between, and outside of communities. In such a rich digital age, images and the conversations behind them are what we need.

It's important to know that this project isn't static, it's occurring within a context of a growing world food crisis, a growing oil shortage, climate change, economic declines, wars and mounting global tensions. Forest communities have many ideas to share and a lot to learn. In this kind of a new world, we all need each other a lot more than we realize. You might say that starting within forest communities is like working from the heart of the world and reaching out. I believe this. This kind of message resonates with everyone. The website has visitors from 249 countries and we've just begun. People are hungry for dialog and to be part of the solution. We can all play a part in this. It's very appropriate that is all beginning right now and in Malaysia.

What were your experiences of the art fairs on the West Coast?

Before I went to Malaysia as a Fulbright Scholar, I signed up for a chaotic tour of about 30 art shows in the United States. I traded my car that gave me access to the Montana backcountry and mountains for a van. My schedule was brutal and it was first time running a real business. I lived like a rock star, worried about money, sleeping in the van, and not attending to my most important relationship. I don't want that life again. But I did learn a lot about the photography business. I also found supporters and project donors.

Some people get sensitive when they learn that some of the images are for sale. Right now, though, sales (all of which are considered US tax deductible donations), pay for workshop cameras, facilitators, NGO staff, guides, field expenses, translation help, repairs, and transport. The project budget runs about 5000RM per month. Without some income from photography, this whole operation wouldn't be possible. Sales are one way we deal with the mission of creating a dialog and supporting people for their time and efforts.

Recently, donations allowed the purchase of some cameras to leave semi-permanently in forest communities. This is really exciting.

We are busy working on more sustainable funding models. One thing I've always done is provide prints to people I work with. This provides a lot of community dialog, and, it's also resulted in some children's books that I've begun developing with forest communities. One another comment on funding. From an organizational perspective, we are happy to give large format images and put together installations for corporations. This helps us and it gets large bodies of audiences to see our work. This is a key advantage photography has over any other medium. Given the expertise within communities and the capacity we are

building within ourselves, we can often write and talk a lot about the images we make on our large format printer.

What other photographers do you admire?

I admire a lot of photographers. Eugene Smith is an incredible war time and documentary photographer. I find myself quoting Vincent Laforet often and I regularly read the blogs of David Alan Harvey and get great technical advice from Tim Laman, who has done some wonderful work in forests in Borneo. He is one of growing breed of dedicated conservation photographers. This is a growing movement of artists that promote conservation. Part of this whole cause and my niche as a photographer involves making the connection with people who have intimate stories to share; tidbits of knowledge that cultivate dialog. The emphasis is one the making and the creation of the photograph. A lot of images take that key *decisive moment* of capture, but the process for me often emphasizes the story of the making and the knowledge behind it. That's the art, that's the creation. Images of meaning are made in these uncommon hours.

There is something else of importance here. When I give talks to young people I often start by asking them who there heroes are. If people can name any, they are usually not living people. I think this is important because some image makers are my heroes; they inspire me to do this work. In this era of image saturation, I'm concerned about the general quality of images and the fact that some of my heroes are struggling – just like me—to realize their dream of inspiring the world with images of meaning. I think it's very important to support photographers and image makers who do this work. Good images and stories help make current living heroes who can be our next door neighbors or individuals living in forest communities. We all need people to identify with, causes that make us more connected to our local and global communities. Supporting the arts helps us support one another.

What about your recent return to the States and your decision to remain here in Malaysia?

Yes. I spent almost a month back in the US. I had the job interview; I connected with friends but I realized my community was here. I still don't have some magic bullet answers about how this entire project will be financially solvent, but I'm confident in our mission and vision. Friends have provided some contract work while we work on the funding details. The belief is important. We welcome ideas and contributions, either to the organization or our specific project proposals.

Where does your strength come from, mental, physical, it must be tough in a number of ways spending extended periods in the jungle

I wish I had a smooth answer for this. I don't. Most of the time, if you must know, I'm scared to death. I might have a visa, but there a lot of important details that aren't worked out. We need a studio space, funding for projects, some equipment. It would be nice to start paying our growing network of volunteers.

What keeps me going is belief. This is the point where a lot of people would walk away from this dream. I just turned 33. Back in the states, I had dreams about what forest teachers are told me. I had all these notes about forest knowledge and management. I had stories of people methods of conflict resolution, sketch maps, hopes and dreams. These dreams aren't mine to have or take. But they inspire me.

This is a living dream. This project is an opportunity for everyone involved to live part of their dream outright. This is a huge act of creativity. It's faith and belief. I think it's something that will make us all stronger. And I mean all of us.

Was there a key factor in your decision to stay?

My passion for people and forests. My belief in positive action. And that this mutual creation of stories and images can change our world and individual lives.

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