

# FOCUSED VISIONARY



Earth Balance



NOAH JACKSON UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTING BOTH THE FORESTS AND THE FOREST PEOPLE, HE TALKS WITH **DOUGLAS WILLIAMS** ABOUT THE PART HE'S PLAYING WITH HIS WORK IN EAST MALAYSIA

**N**oah Jackson is a modern man with an adventurous, pioneering spirit and a hands-on approach. A crusading environmentalist, writer and artist with vision, the 33-year-old recently decided not to return to his native US and instead continue his work in East Malaysia. For most of the past twelve months Noah has been living among the indigenous people deep within the forests of Sarawak and Sabah. As a trained forester and anthropologist Noah has been chronicling the rare, pristine wilderness and the lives and folklore of the people who live there.

Through his work he hopes to raise awareness of the value of the knowledge held within these communities and to convey the importance of their continued, untrammelled existence. He also shares with the world the wonder and awe that he feels towards the forests and the forest people through his arresting, and astonishingly beautiful photographic art.

#### WHERE YOU ARE 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 hiking in the woods and climbing mountaintops. The American West and its surfaces first captivated me when I drove across the country when I was 18-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. In graduate school the forests and land in Montana were kind to me. The forest gave me a roof, images, food, and even a firewood salvage business. Because of this, I usually say I'm from Montana, just south of the Canadian Border.

#### WHAT FIRST SWITCHED YOU ON TO FORESTS?

It was really the geography of my childhood that switched me on to forests. 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 the kids were rough kids but the mountains and the forest transformed them, they transformed me. Special places can transform anyone.



Ginger Garden Eyes



**YOUR FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLE?**

In 1999 I worked as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was placed on a remote island, Panay. 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 knew. 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 new.

**SUBSEQUENT RELATIONS YOU HAVE BUILT WITH 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, they have a range of experiences and knowledge. As a group, they are pretty good at asking questions such as whose land is this? Who has use rights? Who has access? Who has power? And those are good important dialogues that forest communities, indigenous or not, need to be having.

**WHAT ARE YOUR CONCERNS REGARDING THE PLIGHT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE?**

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 kinds of teachers from professors, guides, communities, indigenous people, businessmen and women, 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 dialogues. 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. I'd spend my afternoons in the darkroom with the high school kids printing in the darkroom.

Long before that I had my own viewfinder camera and 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 20 kilogram field camera through the mud flats in Maine and hitch rides on lobster boats to make it to these places. I started early learning about the relations required to build and make intimate images. It's a constant process of self-discovery.

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Afternoon Harvest - Bamboo Basket



Nomadic Penan Hunting Ground

**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! Organisations 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 together. This takes a lot of planning and support. We've established an organisation that will help communities document their knowledge, thoughts, and voice.

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 dialogue within, between, and outside of communities. In such a rich digital age, images and the conversations behind them are what we need.

**AND YOUR RECENT RETURN TO THE STATES AND YOUR SUBSEQUENT 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 organisation or our specific project proposals.

**WHERE DOES YOUR STRENGTH COME FROM, MENTAL, PHYSICAL? IT MUST BE TOUGH 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 told me. I had all these notes about forest knowledge and management. I had stories of people's 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.

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