

Article

Why Look at Endangered Animals? Dualism, Archival Desire, and the Visual Culture of Extinction

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Abstract

This article examines endangered-animal photography as a prominent and often unquestioned form of conservation visual culture. Focusing on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and Joel Sartore's Photo Ark, it considers how photographs of endangered animals move between scientific documentation, emotional appeal, archival preservation, and conservation publicity. Framed through Val Plumwood's analysis of human/nature dualism and its objectifying structures, this analysis argues that such images can render nonhuman life knowable as an object of human classification and intervention. While conservation photography can generate attention and concern, it can easily reproduce dualistic patterns by isolating animals from ecological relations, framing them as passive objects of visual knowledge and management, and substituting symbolic preservation for ecological understanding and protection. A less dualistic conservation visibility would not abandon endangered animals as photographic subjects, but instead situate them within the damaged, interdependent, and politically produced worlds that shape their vulnerability.

Keywords: conservation photography; Val Plumwood; IUCN Red List; Joel Sartore's Photo Ark; human/nature dualism

Photography of endangered animals occupies a privileged and largely unquestioned position within contemporary visual culture. These photographs are widely assumed to cultivate empathy, ecological awareness, and support for conservation initiatives (Ruiz-Villar et al. 2025, p. 541). Yet images of vulnerable beings, whether captured in the wild or in zoos, establish a particular structure of looking in which nonhuman life is framed as an object of visual knowledge, emotional investment, and, ultimately, human intervention. Why do we take these photographs, and what kind of work do we imagine them performing?

The confidence in photography's ethical force rests on the familiar logic that visual encounter produces concern, and that to 'know' endangered animals is to love them and therefore to want to save them. Yet it is also possible that to know them photographically is to know them sufficiently. Photographs may provide a feeling of ethical encounter, even of ecological learning, without necessarily compelling any sustained reckoning with the extractive industrial practices, fossil-fuel dependencies, and political-economic structures driving the contemporary ecological crisis.

John Berger famously describes the progressive marginalization of animals from shared spaces of human life. In his essay 'Why Look at Animals?', animals reappear in modern culture as objects of spectacle, nostalgia, and symbolic meaning (Berger 1980). Contemporary conservation imagery suggests a further rupture. Animals are now increasingly encountered as endangered figures inhabiting a spectral realm of human-managed visibility, one in which their meaning derives from being monitored, classified, represented,



Academic Editor: Andrew M. Nedd

Received: 15 May 2026

Revised: 14 July 2026

Accepted: 19 July 2026

Published: 27 July 2026

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and preserved as a condition of survival. Berger's question thus acquires renewed urgency under Anthropocene conditions. When multispecies worlds are being materially unmade, what forms of knowledge, responsibility, or control does photographic looking enable or foreclose? This question resonates with Karla McManus's account of animal visibility as a problem of looking at and looking for animals. McManus asks whether visual media can create meaningful proximity between human viewers and animals, or whether such looking remains implicated in anthropomorphism, projection, and human hubris (McManus 2018, pp. 201–4).

This article explores these questions through two large, well-established, and influential platforms that make endangered life visible: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and Joel Sartore's Photo Ark. Although very different in purpose, authorship, and visual style, both rely on photography to mediate the public encounter with species at risk. Considered together, they make it possible to examine how conservation imagery moves between documentation, affective appeal, scientific authority, archival preservation, and anticipatory memorialization.

The argument that follows is interpretive rather than quantitative. It combines close visual analysis with concepts drawn from visual culture studies and environmental humanities to investigate the representational structures of these two platforms. The Red List and Photo Ark are treated as illustrative case studies rather than as representative samples of conservation photography in its entirety. Within the Red List, the discussion focuses on a sample drawn from its prominent, public facing "Amazing Species" feature. The aim is to identify recurring representational tendencies that illuminate broader questions about conservation visibility, archival desire, and human/nature dualism.

Val Plumwood's analysis of dualist thinking in relation to the human/nature divide provides a useful framework for a critique of conservation photography. Developed most fully in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Plumwood 1993), her theorization helps explain how nonhuman life can be valued, protected, and even mourned while still being framed as passive object, resource, or managed other. For Plumwood, dualism is not simply a habit of conceptual separation, but a historically embedded structuring process that divides the world into active subjects and passive objects, centres and margins, agents and resources (Plumwood 1993, pp. 41–59).

This is especially valuable for thinking about endangered-animal imagery, because conservation photography often appears ethically benign, even reparative, while nevertheless framing nonhuman life as something to be seen, known, classified, and managed by human intermediaries. Plumwood identifies five interlocking mechanisms through which hierarchical dualisms are reproduced: 'backgrounding', 'radical exclusion', 'incorporation', 'instrumentalism', and 'homogenisation'. These function dialectically: backgrounding and radical exclusion deny continuity and dependency between human and nonhuman life, while incorporation, instrumentalism, and homogenisation deny the autonomy and independent value of the nonhuman other (Plumwood 1993, pp. 60, 66–67). Together, these mechanisms highlight two foundations of Plumwood's critique: first, the denial of human embeddedness in, and dependency on, the nonhuman world (Plumwood 1993, pp. 69–71); and second, the refusal to recognize nonhuman beings as autonomous centres of value rather than as beings that exist for human knowledge, consumption, use, amusement, or management (Plumwood 1993, pp. 122–24).

Plumwood's critique of modern scientific rationality is especially relevant here. In her account, the Cartesian model of objectivity that underpins modern science depends on distance from the senses, emotions, and bodily experience. This model participates in a broader 'death of nature,' in which the natural world is no longer seen as active, generative, or purposive, but as mechanically ordered matter available for detached observation and

human use (Plumwood 1993, p. 142). Within this mechanistic worldview, nature appears as passive and without ends of its own: a ‘teleological vacuum, into which human ends must enter’ (Plumwood 1993, p. 110).

Plumwood situates the rise of mechanistic conceptions of nature alongside the emergence of capitalist modes of appropriation (Plumwood 1993, pp. 110–11). Accordingly, instrumental rationality increasingly approaches the world as a resource to be used, managed, and appropriated. From this perspective, conservation knowledge and practice form part of this historical trajectory. The scientific management of endangered species may therefore reproduce, in its assumptions about what nature is and how it should be known, the very dualistic structures that foster ecological degradation.

The article proceeds in three stages. It first considers the Red List as a hybrid scientific and visual archive before turning to the more overtly affective and commemorative visual logic of Joel Sartore’s Photo Ark. A final section considers how both projects participate in broader archival imaginaries surrounding extinction and ecological loss.

1. The Red List: Scientific Archive and Conservation Image Culture

Established in 1964, the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species has evolved into what its institutional stewards describe as the world’s most comprehensive information source on the global extinction risk status of animals, plants, and fungi. It is presented not simply as a list but as a scientific and policy instrument, a ‘critical indicator’ of biodiversity health and a ‘Barometer of Life’ intended to guide conservation priorities, inform policy, identify key sites and habitats for protection, and support targeted recovery efforts (The IUCN Red List 2026).

Produced through a vast collaborative enterprise involving IUCN staff, specialist commissions, partner organisations, and expert networks, the Red List is now used by governments, NGOs, educators, natural resource planners, and the business community. With more than 172,600 species assessed so far, including more than 48,600 listed as threatened with extinction, it also projects an expansive future for itself, aiming to assess at least 260,000 species and to reassess 142,000 of them to improve taxonomic coverage and strengthen conservation decision-making (The IUCN Red List 2026).

A 2019 study by Jessica Betts and colleagues reinforces this institutional self-description by concluding that the Red List has had both ‘direct and indirect impact on conservation practice’, especially in generating scientific knowledge, raising awareness, influencing funding allocation, informing legislation and policy, and helping connect actors involved in conservation action. They conclude that it is ‘a vital tool in global conservation efforts’, even while noting that ‘it was challenging to measure specific impacts because of its ubiquitous nature (Betts et al. 2020, p. 632)’.

The urgency of the Red List’s classificatory and conservation mission is sharpened by recent projections that future biodiversity loss may amount to roughly 12–40% of species, a scale described as catastrophic (Wiens and Saban 2025, pp. 375–84). Other recent syntheses likewise point to very substantial losses, including estimated average losses of 32% if all currently threatened species disappear, and projected mammal extinctions over the coming century equivalent to 16% of the species known from the last 130,000 years (Hatfield et al. 2025, p. 8).

The IUCN Red List can thus be understood as an apparatus for the measurement, classification, and management of extinction risk, one in which biodiversity becomes increasingly legible as population metrics, threat assessments, distribution maps, and conservation categories. Its scientific importance and contribution to conservation practice are not in question here. The question, rather, is what representational consequences follow from translating endangered life into these forms of knowledge. As this archive moves

toward comprehensive coverage, it risks functioning imaginatively as a substitute for living systems, a repository in which species become increasingly knowable as data even as their material presence diminishes. This dynamic resonates with Baudrillard's account of simulation, in which representation acquires autonomy from the reality it purports to describe (Baudrillard 1981, pp. 9–17).

Within the Red List's scientific and classificatory structure, photographs occupy an ambiguous but significant position. Across the platform, they are unevenly distributed across species and often absent for less charismatic, less documented, or less easily imaged organisms. Where present, they serve primarily as illustrative supplements to scientific information rather than as central components of assessment. Their styles vary widely, reflecting their origins in different photographic practices rather than in any unified visual methodology.

The Red List also includes more public-facing areas where photographs play a much larger role. To explore this visual dimension of the platform, I examined the site's "Amazing Species" feature over thirty consecutive days in January 2026. This category comprises a subset of 557 entries drawn from the much larger Red List inventory, with four species appearing prominently at the top of the site each time the page is refreshed. Because this rotating selection functions as a prominent visual entry point into the Red List, it provides an illustrative window onto the ways endangered organisms are curated for public attention. Of the 120 species examined, 39 were mammals, 26 plants, 15 reptiles, 12 birds, 8 fish, 8 insects, 6 amphibians, 4 snails, 1 coral, and 1 fungus or lichen. Ninety-five of the 120 were threatened in the sense of being categorized as Critically Endangered, Endangered, or Vulnerable.

All 120 species in this sample were accompanied by photographs. The 'Amazing Species' category therefore appears to constitute a specially visualized subset of the larger archive, a space in which endangered organisms are featured not simply because they belong to the Red List, but because they can be rendered visible to viewers through photography. The category thus suggests that visibility itself is part of how endangered life is curated for public attention, emotional engagement, and, very likely, donation. It reflects the well-established notion that the environment 'cannot plead its own case', and therefore 'must be represented' by specialist human individuals and agencies (Boström and Ugglä 2016, pp. 355, 359).

The sample points to a decentralized and broadly inclusive approach to image gathering. Of the 120 photographs examined, 116 were supplied by different individual or organizational contributors. This dispersed pattern suggests that the platform is striving for coverage rather than for aesthetic consistency. The governing priority appears to be photographic representation where possible, rather than adherence to a coherent house style or consistent standard of photographic quality.

The contributor profile reinforces this impression. Of the credited contributors in the sample, 56.3% were academics, researchers, or conservation scientists; 21.0% were professional wildlife photographers; 11.8% were institutional or other non-individual credits; and 10.9% could not be confidently assigned to one of these categories. A clear majority of the photographs, then, came not from the professional field of wildlife photography but from people working in zoological, botanical, ecological, taxonomic, or conservation contexts. Professional wildlife photographers formed an important minority, accounting for about one-fifth of the total, while institutional credits made up a smaller but still notable share.

This distribution suggests that the Red List's photographic culture is not primarily shaped by the conventions of elite nature photography. Rather, it emerges from a broad and heterogeneous network of field science, conservation practice, museum and zoo work, botanical documentation, institutional outreach, and wildlife photography proper. In many

cases, the image seems to have been taken because the organism needed to be identified, documented, publicized, or made visible within a conservation context, rather than because the photographer was pursuing a self-consciously artistic image.

On this basis, Red List photographs can be understood as falling along a continuum rather than into a strict binary. At one pole are descriptive or evidentiary photographs. A good example is the late herpetologist Malcolm John Largen's photograph of a Bale Mountains Treefrog (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/57703/16948437>, accessed on 1 January 2026). The specimen, perched on a broad green leaf, fills the frame, making its complex markings, greenish-yellow colouring, and physical characteristics readily visible. Flash appears to have been used to enhance visibility and likely also to freeze motion. The photograph is clear rather than crisp, probably because of the shallow depth of field, the reduced contrast between the frog, the leaf, and the background foliage, and the glare produced by the slick, reflective surfaces of both frog and leaf. From a scientific perspective, however, these limitations are of little consequence. The image's primary purpose is to render the organism as an identifiable biological subject. Here, completeness and legibility matter most; background distractions, awkward framing, flat light, or heavy flash do not necessarily count against the image so long as the organism itself can be clearly seen. Such images belong broadly to the visual culture of scientific documentation. Even when the result is a slightly blurry or partially cut-off image, such as Klaus M. Stiefel's Instamatic-quality underwater snapshot of a Turtleheaded Sea Snake (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/176720/7290209>, accessed on 1 January 2026) or Susan Cheyne's dim night-flash shot of a barely discernible Otter Civet (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/6082/45197343>, accessed on 1 January 2026), the photographs remain scientifically useful insofar as they convey the species' form, colouring, in situ activity, and relation to habitat.

At the other pole are aesthetic or affective nature photographs, in which the organism is not merely shown but framed as a compelling photographic subject. Ch'ien Lee's photograph of a Common Woolly Bat (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/154195594/21973742>, accessed on 1 January 2026) and Emmanuel Baril's portrait of a Binturong (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/41690/45217088>, accessed on 1 January 2026) are good examples. Lee's bat is caught dramatically in mid-flight, wings spread wide as it prepares to land on a bright green tropical pitcher plant. Here, flash freezes motion and illuminates detail without producing distracting glare, while its fall-off creates a stark black background. The open-mouthed pitcher and the arc of its stem echo the sweep of the bat's outstretched wings, giving the image a striking formal coherence as well as vivid colour and drama. Baril's Binturong photograph is artful in a different but equally effective way. Rendered full frame in bright sunlight, the animal's thick, richly textured fur, glossy black nose, and bushy ear tufts stand out against a heavily blurred background of muted colour. It looks directly at the camera, as if arrested by the photographer's presence. Telephoto magnification brings it into close visual proximity with the viewer, enhancing both its legibility and its sense of animal strangeness. In photographs of this kind, composition, timing, pose, light, colour harmony, isolation, background control, and emotional charge all become important. The point is not simply to show what the organism looks like, but to render it photographically interesting. Such images belong more clearly to the traditions of nature photography, magazine photography, and conservation publicity, and they participate in economies of prestige, rarity, and visual accomplishment that exceed the Red List itself.

Between these poles lies a third category: conservation-publicity photography. These images are often clear and descriptive enough to serve informational purposes, yet they are also selected for public appeal. Their primary function appears to be outreach. They

are suited to website headers, campaign pages, donor appeals, and educational materials. They may lack the formal ambition of top-tier nature photography, but they are not neutral scientific records either. Rather, they are serviceable conservation images: clear enough to inform, attractive enough to engage. A good example is Fundación ProAves's photograph of a Yellow-eared Parrot (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/22685760/181190084>, accessed on 1 January 2026). The image is framed to show only the upper two-thirds of the bird, a choice that does less to document the specimen in full than to give the parrot a more expressive presence. The bird's bright green and yellow colouring, its almost human-like regard, and the moderate flash lighting help produce an arresting image, even if the spidery, lichen-splotched branches in the background are distracting. The photograph is no prizewinner, but it is effective as conservation outreach. This middle zone of photography is important insofar as it shows how Red List imagery often operates between documentation and publicity.

The contributor breakdown maps broadly, though not perfectly, onto this continuum. Academics, researchers, and conservation scientists are more likely to supply descriptive-evidentiary images, while professional wildlife photographers are more likely to contribute aesthetically ambitious or emotionally engaging nature photographs. Institutional and organizational contributors often occupy the middle ground, offering images that remain close to scientific legibility while also serving outreach and awareness-building functions. The Red List's visual culture is therefore best understood not as a single photographic regime but as a composite one, assembling scientific-descriptive, conservation-publicity, and aesthetic nature-photography modes within a single archive.

This helps explain why photographs within the Red List platform are at once secondary and strategically important. They are secondary because they do not determine the assessment itself. But they are strategically important because they give visible form to, particularize, and publicize what would otherwise remain a largely statistical and classificatory archive. They provide indexical confirmation of existence, translate abstract threat categories into emotionally legible form, and mediate between scientific authority and public feeling. They are especially important in the platform's public-facing interfaces, where the Red List's 'Barometer of Life' becomes not just a tool of scientific assessment but part of a wider conservation image culture.

From a Plumwoodian perspective, all three photographic registers remain implicated in dualistic structures, though in different ways. The more evidentiary image participates in a documentary logic that renders organisms visible as units of knowledge and targets of management. The more polished wildlife photograph isolates the subject from the ecological and political conditions that place it in danger, incorporates it into human symbolic narratives, and instrumentalizes its image within broader economies of conservation communication and aesthetic value. The middle category of conservation-publicity photography combines these tendencies, making species both scientifically legible and publicly engaging. In all three cases, the photograph can make endangered life more visible and knowable while also encouraging viewers to encounter it as an image rather than as part of a living ecological world.

Joshua Schuster's concept of the contemporary 'extinction shot' is useful here because it helps name the point at which scientific visibility and aestheticization converge. As extinction rates rise, he suggests, it becomes culturally expected that endangered beings will be visually documented. Such photographs often hover between evidence and memorial, between respectful contemplation and decontextualized display (Schuster 2023, p. 67). Read in this light, the photographs within the Red List's public-facing interfaces can begin to resemble a form of anticipatory mourning. The endangered organism is not only

assessed and classified; it is framed, contemplated, and preserved as an image in advance of disappearance (Schuster 2023, p. 67).

2. The Photo Ark: Portraiture, Sentimentality, and Simulation

If the Red List makes visible a composite conservation image culture in which documentation, emotional appeal, and publicity intermingle, Joel Sartore's Photo Ark can be read as a more concentrated and self-conscious intensification of the same archival and affective logic. Presented on Sartore's personal website as a 25-year effort to photograph 'every species in (human care around the globe Sartore 2026)', the Ark currently contains more than 63,000 photographs covering, by the current count, 17,823 species, most of them photographed in zoos, aquariums, and wildlife sanctuaries. Sartore is publicly framed as an award-winning explorer, photographer, conservationist, and founder of a long-term National Geographic-supported project devoted to documenting species before they disappear (National Geographic 2026). In both his own self-presentation and National Geographic's promotion of the Photo Ark, the work is cast in the language of mission, service, and moral urgency, such that photography becomes an apparently direct instrument for helping endangered species by making them visible and emotionally compelling to human audiences (Sartore 2026; National Geographic 2026).

To examine the Photo Ark's visual logic, I reviewed two image sets from Sartore's website: the first 120 photographs appearing in the Photo Ark image bank, and the 38 photos included in 'The Photo Ark—Gallery', described on the site as 'some of the most powerful, interesting, and popular images from the Photo Ark'. My analysis combines attention to recurring formal features across these sets, including standardized backgrounds, frontal or quasi-frontal address, high-resolution bodily detail, expressive poses, and the removal of animals from ecological context, with close readings of selected images that make these tendencies especially visible.

This framing is reinforced by the project's donation page, where the 'National Geographic Photo Ark' is described as a photo archive of global biodiversity intended to build compassion for animals and inspire action to protect wildlife (Sartore 2026). Sartore appears not simply as a photographer, but as a familiar contemporary variation on the heroic wildlife documentarian, whose mobility, technical mastery, and commitment are presented as forms of conservation action in themselves (National Geographic 2021; Los Angeles Center of Photography 2026). This broadly affirmative framing underpins public descriptions of the project as concerned not only with saving interesting or 'charismatic' animals, but more fundamentally with preserving the ecosystems upon which humans themselves rely (Myers 2022). In a 2025 event description, Sartore is quoted as saying, 'When we save species, we're actually saving ourselves (Texas Tech 2025)'.

At its most persuasive, the project can be defended on exactly these grounds. The isolation of animals against a common background, and their presentation within a standardized visual field, democratizes attention across different forms of life, giving unfamiliar, uncharismatic, or easily overlooked species a comparable claim on human notice and concern. Sartore's photograph of an Essex Skipper (<https://www.joelsartore.com/ins007-00299/?context=Essex&index=1>, accessed on 1 January 2026), a small, furry butterfly with bright orange-brown wings, photographed at the Minnesota Zoo, illustrates this aspect of the project. Except for emblematic species such as the monarch, small butterflies rarely occupy the centre of popular endangered-species imagery. Sartore's images of snails, beetles, crabs, clams, worms, spiders, sea sponges, and other lesser-known at-risk organisms are therefore an important and unusual dimension of the Photo Ark. In such cases, the standardized studio portrait can work against some hierarchies of conservation visibility by asking viewers to attend to organisms they might otherwise overlook.

Yet this visual equality comes at a cost. Radically different beings, facing distinct forms of endangerment within fragile and unevenly damaged ecosystems, are visually differentiated while being formally levelled. Each is submitted to the same portrait convention, the same neutral ground, and the same human-centred structure of visual address. Sartore's razor-sharp photograph of a Eurasian Kestrel (<https://www.joelsartore.com/bir021-00246/?context=Eurasian+kestrel&index=11>, accessed on 1 January 2026) from the Hongshan Forest Zoo in China exemplifies both the visual force and the limitations of this portrait convention. The bird leans forward, its legs spread wide and its wings partially outstretched, as if preparing to take flight. Its downturned beak and mouth, together with its large, dark eyes, invite a reading of a faintly worried expression, while its left claw, spread flat on the white surface, seems poorly suited to the studio ground on which it has been placed. The image is striking in part because it offers the bird so fully to view. Every feather, talon, and contour becomes available for inspection. That availability, however, depends upon the removal of the bird from any sustaining environment. Its vulnerability is communicated through isolation and complete availability for scrutiny rather than through the relational ecological dynamics that shape its life and endangerment. The result is a powerful but narrowing form of conservation visibility, one that risks reinforcing the perception of species as detachable objects rather than as participants in complex multispecies systems.

Berger's account of the modern zoo helps clarify what precedes the Photo Ark's portrait convention. The animals Sartore photographs are not merely endangered, but already subjected to institutional forms of marginalization, isolation, and display. In 'Why Look at Animals?' Berger describes the zoo as a monument to a broken relation between humans and animals, a place in which animals have been 'rendered absolutely marginal' and where the expected reciprocity of the gaze has largely collapsed (Berger 1980, pp. 22–24). This is highly relevant to Sartore's project. The Photo Ark does not simply decontextualize animals through portraiture; it depicts them after they have already been displaced from ecological relation and reconstituted, under these structuring conditions, as captives, specimens, and spectacles.

The spectacle point is especially clear in Sartore's photograph of a Horsfield's Tarsier (<https://www.joelsartore.com/ani064-00113/>, accessed on 1 January 2026) at Taman Safari in Indonesia. The primate appears like a cathedral gargoyle, its pose inviting a reading of dramatic 'freakishness'. Captured upright on its hind legs, it spreads its arms, legs, and long fingers and toes outward, as if its body has been made maximally available to the camera. Its enormous, bug-like eyes fix directly on the viewer, while its open mouth, visible tongue, and small teeth give it a playfully manic quality. Yet this theatricality may be misleading. Given that the Horsfield's tarsier is nocturnal, the pose seems unlikely to represent a neutral or 'natural' expression of its behaviour. It may instead register the animal's response to the unfamiliar studio environment into which it has been inserted, and to the powerful strobe used to render it with such startling clarity and detail. What looks at first like a slightly comic attempt to amuse or frighten may convey alarm, disorientation, or fear, although the photograph itself cannot determine the animal's subjective experience. McManus's analysis of animal visuality is useful here because it shifts attention from the human desire to look at animals to the more difficult problem of looking for, with, or on behalf of them. Her discussion of Catherine Chalmers's animal videos stresses both the ethical appeal and the conceptual limits of attempting to enter the animal's perspective, while also reminding us that the camera itself may function as an intrusive or predatory eye rather than as a neutral instrument of encounter (McManus 2018, pp. 203–4, 206, 209–10; on the harm caused to wildlife by some acts of photography, see Mutalib 2018 and Koli 2025, pp. 39–40).

Sartore describes endangered organisms as the ‘pieces and parts that we’re throwing away (O’Neill 2010)’, a formulation that implicitly situates living beings within a mechanistic framework. Such wording makes species appear as discrete, bounded, detachable elements in a larger functional apparatus, rather than as beings whose lives are constituted through habitat and relation. In this register, conservation appears as a form of technical intervention directed toward repairing a damaged system rather than sustaining the integrity of ecological webs. The language resonates strongly with the mechanistic ontology of nature identified by Plumwood, in which living beings are construed as divisible components within a world rendered intelligible through technological management.

At the same time, Sartore’s use of portraiture raises further questions about the anthropomorphic structure of conservation visuality. Portraiture is a historically and culturally specific visual form associated with human individuality and commemoration. Transposed onto nonhuman subjects, it may generate empathy, but it also projects culturally embedded human models of personhood onto nonhuman beings. Sartore’s double portrait of a male and female Spectacled Eider (<https://www.joelsartore.com/bir060-00377/?context=spectacled+eider&index=7>, accessed on 1 January 2026), taken at the Alaska SeaLife Center, demonstrates this anthropomorphic effect. The birds appear to be laughing good-naturedly at a joke or amusing event. Both have their beaks parted and their eyes faintly narrowed, as if caught in a moment of shared humorous delight. The male in the foreground tilts his head slightly back, almost as if laughing aloud, while the female appears to gaze toward something amusing beyond the frame. The image does not present the birds as complete organisms. They are shown only from the upper chest and neck upward. Instead, the cropping, paired composition, and facial expressiveness turn them into human-like companions, creatures who seem to appreciate a good joke as much as any human viewer. Such anthropomorphism is closely related to the project’s broader visual levelling across forms of life, an approach Sartore explicitly frames as granting ‘equal weight and consideration’ from ‘snail to sea turtle’. In Plumwood’s terms, this may produce a form of homogenisation, in which difference is acknowledged only after being drawn into the flattened visual field of conventional portraiture.

Baudrillard’s critique of modern animal sentimentality provides another useful lens through which to interpret this dynamic, since sentimentality is central both to Sartore’s stated goals and to the affective appeal of many Photo Ark portraits. For Baudrillard, the proliferation of affectionate attitudes toward animals coincides with their increasing marginalization within contemporary culture. As animals are pushed out of a shared world of encounter and response, sentimental commiseration emerges as a degraded substitute for relation (Baudrillard 1981, pp. 193–96). Conservation portraiture may therefore represent not the restoration of ethical engagement but its aesthetic displacement, producing emotional proximity at the very moment ecological distance intensifies.

Within this affective regime, Sartore’s rhetoric of documenting species ‘before they disappear’ echoes older colonial and scientific salvage paradigms. The photographic archive becomes a repository of vanishing forms, transforming ecological disappearance into an object of visual commemoration. This archival impulse is reinforced by the project’s institutional and commercial infrastructure: books, exhibitions, media partnerships, and speaking engagements all contribute to the construction of a powerful conservation brand in which endangered organisms function simultaneously as ethical symbols and cultural commodities. Awareness thus becomes both an ethical aspiration and a marketable experience. As W.J.T. Mitchell observes, the Photo Ark is ‘faithful to the concept of the “ark” and the “archive”, preserving animals as if ‘in amber’, deliberately removed from the ecological worlds that made them possible. In Mitchell’s reading, the project does not attempt to simulate habitat or restore relational context but instead insists on what he terms

the ‘ghostly presence of an absence’. The photographic image becomes a rescue operation ‘only of images’, producing visual survivors whose biological continuity has given way to visual afterlife (Mitchell 2022, pp. 70–71). Sartore’s portraits thus risk functioning less as instruments of conservation than as anticipatory memorials, staging endangered organisms as already lost (Schuster 2023, p. 67; Barcus 2015; Jolly 2017).

Ursula K. Heise provides a complementary interpretation by emphasizing the cumulative structure of Sartore’s photographic project. Its meaning emerges less from individual images than from their aggregation, producing what she describes as a form of ‘numerical sublime’ (Heise 2016, p. 83). The project is therefore not simply a sequence of striking animal portraits but a vast image inventory, one whose force depends as much on accumulation as on any individual photograph. This accumulation generates a visual analogue to the statistical abstraction of extinction, in which organisms appear as countable entries within a system of inventory rather than as living beings shaped by habitat, interdependence, and environmental change. Read alongside Mitchell’s account of the Photo Ark as a rescue operation ‘only of images’, Heise’s emphasis on accumulation suggests that conservation visibility may increasingly function as a form of anticipatory memorialisation. The archive of portraits risks becoming a substitute for ecological presence, preserving biodiversity symbolically even as the material conditions of multispecies survival continue to erode.

3. Ark Imaginaries and Ecological Abandonment

The memorial function of extinction photography belongs to a broader transformation in contemporary conservation thinking about preservation under conditions of ecological crisis. In its biblical formulation, the ark preserves living beings to ensure the continuity of life after catastrophe. Contemporary technoscientific projects such as biodiversity databases, seed vaults, visual archives, and speculative off-world repositories increasingly imagine preservation by converting living beings into data, stored materials, and visual or scientific records. Photography occupies a crucial place within this shift because it appears to offer a uniquely benign form of preservation: it records without killing, commemorates without overtly possessing, and allows viewers to feel close to beings, habitats, and ecological relations they may never encounter in any direct or material sense. In the Red List, photographs give visible and affective form to a vast classificatory database, helping translate extinction risk into recognizable organisms while also incorporating those organisms into systems of inventory, assessment, and management. In the Photo Ark, the same archival impulse becomes more concentrated and aestheticized, preserving animals as isolated portraits rather than as beings embedded in lifeworlds. In both cases, photography helps normalize the movement from ecological presence to symbolic survival. The image becomes a record of life, but also a substitute for the conditions that allow life to continue.

Projects that envision off-world conservation archives or planetary escape scenarios intensify this logic, suggesting that life’s future may be imagined not through the repair of earthly ecosystems but through their replication, storage, or memorialization elsewhere. Such imaginaries reproduce, in secular form, the dualistic hope of transcendence beyond earthly dependency. The photographic documentation of life thus coexists with imaginaries of its abandonment, insofar as archives, databases, and images promise that all will not be lost even as the material conditions of multispecies survival continue to erode.

4. Conclusions

The Red List and Photo Ark demonstrate that endangered-species photography does not simply make threatened life visible. It also helps organize the terms on which endangered beings become knowable and imaginatively preservable. Such photography must therefore be understood as a historically situated practice embedded within systems of

scientific classification, emotional appeal, archival preservation, and conservation power. To interrogate it through Plumwood's framework is to examine how visual culture participates in the reproduction of the conceptual structures that shape ecological futures. A less dualistic conservation visuality would not necessarily abandon endangered animals as photographic subjects, though this analysis suggests that the ethics of such looking cannot be taken for granted. Rather, it would situate endangered animals within the damaged, interdependent, and politically produced worlds they inhabit, instead of isolating them as self-sufficient icons. In Plumwood's terms, such a visuality would resist the backgrounding of human ecological dependency, the reduction in nonhuman life to passive objects of knowledge and intervention, and the tendency to frame endangered beings primarily through human emotions, systems of classification, and projects of management. Taken together, the Red List and Photo Ark suggest that the ethical force of conservation photography depends not simply on whether endangered beings are made visible, but on how that visibility is organized. A less dualistic visual practice would connect individual animals to habitat, multispecies relations, histories of extraction, and the political and economic conditions of endangerment. It would also acknowledge the limits of photography itself, resisting the suggestion that visual preservation can substitute for ecological continuity. Projects such as (Misrach and Orff 2012) suggest one possible direction, pairing photography with explanatory and cartographic forms that reconnect visible scenes to the larger systems of extraction, infrastructure, and environmental harm in which they are embedded.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This statement can be excluded as the study did not require ethical approval.

Informed Consent Statement: This statement can be excluded as the study did not involve humans.

Data Availability Statement: The original data presented in the study are openly available at www.iucnredlist.org, accessed on 1 January 2026 and www.joelsartore.com, accessed on 1 January 2026.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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