



BACKGROUNDER FOR NEWS RELEASE (May 31, 2007)

Artists for Conservation's Fourth Flag Expedition Highlights the Natural History of Bhutan, and Stresses the Importance of Conserving the Ecology of the Region.

About the Artists for Conservation Foundation (AFC)

The Artists for Conservation Foundation (AFC) is a non-profit group of the world's leading nature artists, whose mission is to support wildlife and habitat conservation, biodiversity, sustainability and environmental education through art that celebrates our natural heritage.

Founded in 1997 as the "Worldwide Nature Artists Group" by Jeffrey Whiting - a prominent Canadian artist, author, biologist and professional software engineer - the Group was renamed in 2007. The Foundation's strength lies in its membership and represents a who's-who of nature artists worldwide, including well-known names such as John Banovich, Robert Bateman, Guy Coheleach, Glen Loates, Pollyanna Pickering, Gamini Ratnavira, Andrea Rich and David Shepherd. New members are admitted by invitation only, through a juried process, and only as placements become available. The Foundation dedicates its resources to nurturing its world-class community of nature artists and leveraging this pool of talent to support its mission through a variety of programs and initiatives, including:

- Facilitating art sales to raise funds for conservation
- Supporting artistic field research expeditions to study endangered species and threatened habitats.
- Maintaining the world's largest virtual gallery of nature art.
- Recognizing individuals for their work in support of the conservation cause.
- Producing an annual art exhibition in support of conservation, and an accompanying book and international touring exhibit.
- Planning and spearheading large-scale international environmentally themed art projects.

Through its "Flag Expeditions" program, the Foundation offers fellowships to artists, supporting artistic field research in remote areas of the planet, with a strong emphasis on raising awareness to threatened habitats and endangered species. In the Foundation's "Art for Conservation" program, artists collectively pledge millions of dollars to conservation organizations and programs around the world. The Foundation also supports the conservation cause with a monthly award, recognizing individual artists for their dedication to conservation and the annual prestigious "Simon Combes Conservation Award".

Today, the Foundation is the most progressive and prestigious organization in the world of nature art and represents hundreds of millions of dollars in artwork, though it does not take any brokerage fees or sales commissions on sales made by its members. For the first ten years of its operation, benefiting in part from a donated state-of-the-art technological infrastructure, the Foundation was sustained entirely on membership dues and volunteer labor, although it now seeks patrons, donors, sponsors and partners to enable the continued expansion of its activities. For more information, please visit www.natureartists.com.

About the AFC Flag Expeditions Program

The AFC Flag Expeditions Program (formerly WNAG Flag Expeditions) was created to make possible the field study and artistic rendering of endangered species or habitats deserving of greater public attention. There is a strong emphasis on the study of unique, threatened habitats, and rare or endangered species in remote parts of the world.

Upon return from the expedition, participating artists are required to submit to the Foundation, a written journal and sketchbook of their journey, photos with the AFC flag in situ, a signed flag and video footage when possible.

The AFC provides funding, as well as prominent exposure in a growing number of venues including on the AFC Web site, for each artist and each expedition. Each year at least two Fellowships are offered- each worth up to \$5,000 US.

The Program is open only to AFC Signature Members, who can apply to obtain financial support and the privilege of carrying the AFC flag on their journey. To find how to become a Signature member, please review our Join Us section.

To-date, the AFC has granted 5 fellowships through this program:

- AFC Flag Expedition #1 - "Observing & Portraying the Endangered Harpy Eagle & its Habitat"; Recipient: David Kitler
- AFC Flag Expedition #2 - "The Sacred Source - A Portrait of the Ganges"; Recipient: David Rankin
- AFC Flag Expedition #3 - "The George River Boreal Forest Expedition"; Recipient: Robert Mullen with AFC artists Robert Bateman and Lindsey Foggett
- AFC Flag Expedition #4 - "The Flora & Fauna of Bhutan - An Artist's Journey through the Land of the Thunderdragon"; Recipient: Pollyanna Pickering
- AFC Flag Expedition #5 - "Painting the Painted Dogs - Artistic Study of an Endangered Hunter"; Recipient: Alison Nicholls

The AFC's Flag Expeditions website documents past expeditions and highlights new ones yet to be run. For more information about the program, please visit www.natureartists.com/flagexpeditions/.

About the Expedition to Bhutan:

Bhutan is known to its inhabitants as 'The land of the thunder dragon'. Located in the Himalayas, bordered by Tibet, Nepal and India, virtually the entire country is mountainous. Thanks to its remoteness, political isolation, small population, and difficult terrain, Bhutan has emerged into the 20th century with the majority of its forested lands and unique ecosystems intact. Now, with an increasing population, improved roads, and limited farming land, a major effort is needed to protect this virtually unspoiled mountain kingdom.

Bhutan is home to 165 species of mammals, many of which are extremely threatened. The most remote of the Himalayan countries, Bhutan is the least touched by modernity and is included in Conservation International's list of 19 Global Hotspots for conservation of biodiversity. This 'hotspot' list identifies high biodiversity ecosystems under the greatest threat of destruction as well as wilderness ecosystems which remain virtually intact. These priority 'hotspots' occupy less than 2% of the earth's surface between them, but contain more than 50% of earth's terrestrial biodiversity, and house almost 75% of the world's most endangered plant and animal species.

Because of the unique variety of plants and animals found within Bhutan, ecologists consider this eastern Himalayan kingdom to be an area critically important to global efforts to preserve biological diversity. A total of 26% of the country is within protected areas – either wildlife sanctuaries or national parks, providing habitat for the many endangered species. Large areas of the country remain virtually unexplored. Even the protected areas have not yet been fully studied, and the indigenous species not as yet been comprehensively catalogued.

The main threats to the environment come from poaching and logging. Many of the endangered species in Bhutan are sought after for body parts which have supposed medicinal or other valuable properties. The Bhutan Forestry services division operates an anti-poaching programme, which encompasses endangered plants, animals and trees.

All the animals in Bhutan are protected by the Buddhist ethic, which prohibits killing. As a further protection, the *1995 Forest and Nature Conservation Act* defines several species as totally protected, including the Asian elephant, clouded leopard, leopard cat, and the red panda, a species Pickering has previously painted following her expeditions to China. Bhutan has also developed an Integrated Conservation and Development programme with assistance from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to allow people living within a protected area to farm, graze animals, and collect firewood in harmony with protection management.

The Himalayan black bear, and sloth bear are also found in Bhutan. Other large mammals include the Sambar deer, musk deer, wolf, yak, water buffalo, and the greater one-horned rhino. So far, 675 species of birds have been recorded in Bhutan, reflecting the country's wide range of ecological environments. It is especially famous for its wintering populations of the vulnerable black-necked cranes. The Ibisbill, a high-altitude wader, is unique to the region.

Tigers can be found throughout Bhutan, although the population is mostly concentrated in and around Royal Manas National Park. Governmental conservation measures, coupled with the protected and almost inaccessible habitat, provide sufficient areas to sustain viable breeding populations of several other species of cat, including the Asiatic golden cat, fishing cat, clouded leopard, and marbled cat. The snow leopard can be found in high altitude areas.

In addition to visiting the Royal Manas National Park, the Jigme Dorji National Park, and the Black Mountain National park, Pickering traveled to the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary. This reserve is unique, because it is the only sanctuary in the world created specifically to protect the habitat of the yeti! The Bhutanese name for the yeti is 'Migoi' and these creatures are widely believed to exist throughout the northern part of the country.

The Blue Poppy, Bhutan's national flower can also be found in this region. A monocarpic plant, it blooms only once before producing seeds and dying. Until a British botanist confirmed its existence in 1933, the blue poppy was also widely believed to be mythical - just like the yeti.

Pickering sketched in the field, creating a record of the diverse habitats, and the wildlife which inhabits the region. Based on her finding, she will now complete 50 pieces of original work for a major exhibition, followed by lecture tours and gallery shows. These will highlight the natural history of a Kingdom about which remarkably little is known in the west, and stress the importance of conserving the ecology of the region.

About Artist Pollyanna Pickering:

Pickering is recognized as one of Europe's foremost wildlife artists. She is the most published fine artist in the UK, and her original paintings hang in corporate and private collections throughout the world from Australia to Siberia.

Pickering studied at the London Central school of Art, graduating with distinction, and she has worked freelance since 1969. Her original paintings have been exhibited to critical acclaim in top galleries throughout the UK and Europe. She has her own gallery in the Peak District of Derbyshire where she lives and works. In 1983 her work was first accepted for display by the Royal Academy, the same year in which she won her first major trophy, the Silver Palette Award. For many years she was accredited to the Tryon and Swann gallery, and has exhibited at the Mall galleries with The Society of Wildlife Artists, and in Australia with Christies Fine Art.

Pickering has dedicated her life to the welfare of animals - not only in conserving habitats and species, but also alleviating the suffering of individuals. She is the Founder of the Pollyanna Pickering Foundation, which raises funds for the protection and rescue of wildlife, endangered species and the environment as well as emergency disaster relief.

She is member of The Wildlife Art Society International, and The Society of Animal Artists (New York) and a Signature Member of the Artists for Conservation Foundation and the Society of Feline Artists.

Pickering is a highly acclaimed public speaker, giving over 100 talks each year about her expeditions and conservation work. She is currently booked for lectures through to 2008, with many venues and societies inviting her back annually to hear her latest talks. In 2004 she was voted 'Speaker of the Year' at the national speaker finders conference, beating strong competition from professional lecturers, politicians and actors.

More information on Pickering journey into the Land of the Thunder Dragon can be found at:
www.natureartists.com/flagexpeditions/



Pictured above is a low-resolution photo of Pickering with young Buddhist monks holding the AFC Flag (shown with the Foundations' former insignia, the WNAG), is included in the backgrounder document for this release. A high-resolution version is available upon request. If using, please credit: Anna-Louise Pickering, courtesy of the Artists for Conservation Foundation (www.natureartists.com).

For More Information:

Artists for Conservation Foundation: www.natureartists.com

AFC Flag Expeditions Program: www.natureartists.com/flagexpeditions/

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