

GRAEME GREEN: THE NEW BIG 5

The New Big 5 project is an international initiative to create a New Big 5 of wildlife: the Big 5 of photography, not hunting. Shooting with a camera, not a gun.

Clare Disano talks to British journalist, photographer and founder, **GRAEME GREEN**, about the new initiative to highlight the world's wildlife in crisis.



Graeme Green: The New Big 5

You are known for your love of photographing smaller and lesser-known species, from lizards to birds, as well as the big iconic animals like lions, gorillas and elephants. What initially inspired the idea for the New Big 5 project? And did you have a clear vision from the beginning on what its aim and purpose would be?

The idea developed over time. I first came up with it seven or eight years ago, on assignment in Botswana. Maybe it was hearing the word 'shooting', which people use for both guns and cameras, which put it in my mind. But really it

A celebration of wildlife and wildlife photography with a message: We can save the world's wildlife if we act now.

was a case of thinking a lot about how outdated the idea of the original big 5 is, which was all about the five toughest animals for colonial era hunters to shoot and kill (elephant, lion, leopard, rhino, buffalo). The project isn't an anti-trophy hunting campaign, but I do think, in the year 2020, killing or causing the suffering of animals is something that should be left in the past. It's outdated



Gelada monkey
Simien Mountains, Ethiopia

and cruel, whereas wildlife photography is more relevant and popular today than ever. There's a massive plus with photography that you don't need to kill animals. Photography is a way to celebrate and help protect wildlife. A New Big 5 of wildlife photography felt to me like something that deserved to exist.

I kept turning the idea over in my mind. I decided I wanted to use this lively idea

to make a difference, to get people thinking and talking about wildlife, and to highlight the many threats facing the world's animals.

As a journalist with over fifteen years travelling the planet, and dedicating much of your own work to a wide range of global issues, are there any that have become particularly close to

your heart and impacted your photography?

There are many. I don't just cover wildlife. Some of the stories I've covered that really made a big impact on me include human trafficking in Mexico, tribes fighting for their land in the Amazon, struggles to protect land from giant dams in Patagonia...

One of the first stories I worked on, years ago, was about vultures being wiped out in Nepal by a drug used in livestock. Another ►►

► was an ecotourism project in Cambodia where they were trying to protect endangered animals. I learned early on that a story, both words and photos, can make a big difference, whether it's to people's lives or to wildlife. Photos are often people's first point of contact with an issue. Often that means you need a photo that works visually, that makes an impact, and that communicates a story. People like Ami Vitale and Brent Stirton,

both supporters of the New Big 5, are great at this.

The next ten years are critical for the world's wildlife, with over one million species at risk of extinction. Do you see the New Big 5 as an ongoing project helping to combat this threat?

I'd really like it to be. The project has so far taken more than nine months of really hard work, including long days, late nights, working through weekends, all without any

funding at all. That's difficult to sustain. So I'm really keen to find some kind of funding for the project. I've got so many ideas for the year ahead, for next steps in the New Big 5 project and for connected projects. I've just got to find a way to make it all possible.

You have amassed a very impressive amount of support, from over one hundred equally-impressive and world-renowned wildlife photographers,

conservationists, film-makers, charity organisations and wildlife lovers, including Dr Jane Goodall. How did this come about, and in what ways have they been able to contribute to the project so far?

It took a lot of time to track people down and talk to them but, once I managed to get in contact, people were usually happy to help. It's such a simple idea; to create a New Big 5 of wildlife photography and to use the idea to focus attention on the need to protect the world's wildlife. I think people hear that idea and instantly get it. People care so much about wildlife and want to see more protection for the natural world.

Everyone involved has helped in different ways. I recorded a series of podcasts for the website, for example, with Ami Vitale, Nick Brandt, Thomas D Mangelsen, Steve Winter, Marina Cano, Bertie Gregory, Daisy Gilardini, and more. Others have done interviews or articles for the website and helped spread the word to their followers. Dr Jane Goodall did a great interview for the website and has been a great help in telling her audience about the project. Iain Douglas-Hamilton, founder of Save The Elephants, also did a great podcast with us. Having the support of these people has made a huge difference and really helped get the project and its messages out to people.

The wealth of interviews and podcasts on the New Big 5 website are a fascinating insight into the wildlife experiences of many well-known names, highlighting some of their most poignant concerns. Do any of your own stories serve as a cornerstone to the project?

Not one story, no, but more an amalgamation of experiences. I'd go to somewhere like Ruaha in Tanzania, see and photograph the incredible wildlife there, but also learn about the threats facing animals there; human-wildlife conflict, ►►

Elephant reaching for high branches
Ruaha National Park, Tanzania





►► big cats being killed. Or somewhere like the Maasai Mara in Kenya, which again has such remarkable wildlife, but also has elephants and other animals being killed by farmers protecting their crops, and challenges with growing human populations and less habitat for animals. I'm learning more all the time, and it means you start connecting everything together to see how severe the threat is to the future of some animals.

That's really the central message of the project; that we run a real risk of losing many species we share the planet with, from cheetahs, elephants and lions to turtles, frogs, bats and vultures, each one of them too valuable to lose. The solutions are out there. It's a case of us making sure they happen.

Followers can vote for the five animals that they would like to be included in the New Big 5 from a comprehensive selection listed on project website. It's not an easy choice, as each has such valid reasons for being included. Can you tell us how you came up with the list, and is there a deadline for the public to have their vote?

It was difficult. I talked to photographers and wildlife lovers, and tried to put a list together of some of the animals that seemed like they'd have a good chance of making the final 5. We've got more than forty animals, mainly land mammals, to choose from.

The question we ask people is to vote for their five favourite animals to photograph or see in photos. But conservation is central to the project. It's very likely that every one of the animals that makes up the final New Big 5 will



Bat exodus
Gunung Mulu National Park,
Sarawak, Malaysia

be an 'endangered' or 'critically endangered' species, which should also be a wake-up call. The world's most popular species are all facing the risk of extinction.

The project is about all wildlife, from the icons through to unsung heroes that don't get much attention, and even species we haven't discovered yet.

The plan is to announce the New Big 5 in November, hopefully with a big event, if

we're allowed to get together in crowds by then.

Marine life and birds are currently not included. Are there any plans to create projects for them in the future?

Yes. I thought long and hard about this, as I love marine life and scuba diving, and I also love photographing birds. I discussed it with other photographers, and we felt marine

creatures, like manta rays and whales, and birds might all get a bit 'lost' in the vote, against other popular animals. Underwater photography also requires specialist training and expensive gear, so it's not that accessible. So I made the decision to focus the New Big 5 on land animals. I hope to run future projects focusing on marine life and birds, and one or two other projects. Again, it all ►►

Cheetah mother and cub
Mara Naboisho Conservancy, Kenya





Blue Eyed Lizard
Gunung Mulu National Park,
Sarawak, Malaysia

► depends on funding and resources, but that's the plan.

Besides voting, how else can our readers get involved to help critically endangered animals?

It's important we get the message out to as many people as possible about the threats facing wildlife, from the illegal wildlife trade to habitat loss. So, as well as voting, I'd urge people to read our articles and interviews, listen to our podcasts, and share as much as they can on their social media. Tell friends and family. I've had emails from people who've been inspired by the project to set up their own projects, or to get involved with a cause, which is fantastic.

Many of our articles were written by experts at wildlife charities, so if people want to help, they can find ways, such as donating money to sponsor an acre of land with Orangutan Foundation to help save orangutans. Or they could support Save The Elephants' construction

of beehive fences, which reduces elephants raiding crops in African villages, meaning dead elephants, plus an additional course of income for local people.

People can also use their voices to pressure companies to stop using non-sustainable palm oil that's causing deforestation, or to push for action against the illegal wildlife trade.

I'm also planning to use the New Big 5 project for some fundraising in the next few phases. But, for now, my goal is to get more attention on the world's wildlife. These animals mean so much to all of us and they're essential for the natural balance of the planet. We can't afford to lose them. ●

To select your top five you can place your vote here - www.newbig5.com/vote/. The results will be announced later this year. You can also follow the project on Instagram [@newbig5project](https://www.instagram.com/newbig5project)

GRAEME GREEN

A British photographer and journalist, his work appears in international publications including the BBC, The Sunday Times, The Guardian, Wanderlust, South China Morning Post and New Internationalist. He has photographed wildlife around the world, from Antarctica to Uganda, Malaysia to Mexico. Graeme is also the founder of the New Big 5 project.

