

# *Soul of the Tiger*

Searching for Nature's Answers  
in Southeast Asia

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Haes, Director General of WWF, who gave this project their full support, which helped in many ways.

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becomes the only source of virtue, passion the sole bond of union between husband and wife, falsehood the source of success in life, sex the only means of enjoyment, and outer trappings are confused with inner religion."

That morning Dr. Singh had spoken to 600 people at the conference, a small audience for him since his religious speeches back home draw over a million of the faithful. But he is a natural teacher and a born showman and loves playing to an audience, even if it is only two curious conservationists.

"Since we are now reaching the end of the cycle, when the commitment to *dharma* [duty] is at its weakest, we have no choice but to accept that egoistic, devouring, blind, and reckless elements have the upper hand. But remember the parable of the maharaja who commanded his wise men to invent a sentence which would be appropriate in all times and situations. After working on the problem for a year, they presented him the words: 'And this, too, shall pass away.' This final age will presently disintegrate into fiery chaos, according to the myth, and will subsequently burst forth again, fresh as a flowering lotus, ready to resume the inevitable cycle."

Although tempered by a long exposure to Asian approaches to life, we were trained as members of a pragmatic, industrialized society and were only partially convinced by such fatalism. After all, hasn't history shown a steady growth of economic prosperity? If anything is inevitable, surely it is progress. Or is it?

Helpless to resist our compulsion to rationalize things, we considered the four ecocultural revolutions that have shaped Southeast Asia. Was it fatuous to think that human efforts might alter the inevitability of the cosmic cycle?

The first revolution was the harnessing of fire by hunters, which enabled people to have a major influence on the distribution of forest and grasslands. Only a few of the descendants of these early people still survive as hunters; people like the *Orang Asli* in Malaysia are the people who live in closest contact with nature and have the richest store of traditional knowledge.

The second revolution was the domestication of plants and animals, which brought shifting cultivation to the region and led to perhaps a hundredfold increase in human population. Almost all hill areas are still occupied by shifting cultivators, many of them from minority tribes. "Slash and burners" represent the largest segment of Asian society which has retained an intimate relation-

ship with the natural world. These forest farmers dominated the region for over 5,000 years, but didn't have the political acumen or surplus wealth to develop great kingdoms.

That was the role of the irrigators, who were swept into power as part of the third ecocultural revolution. Using new techniques taught by foreign advisers, they produced sufficient surpluses of rice to support kings, cities, monumental architecture, state religions, and a twenty- to thirtyfold increase in human population. Royalty cleverly did not discard old beliefs; rather they built upon the mythology and folklore of the hunters and shifting cultivators and consolidated their power by claiming kinship to animals such as white elephants, miraculous birds, mermaid queens, giant poisonous snakes, and fierce crocodiles.

The fourth ecocultural revolution—the spread of the world marketplace—has been more significant in its impact on nature than the earlier three revolutions combined, as populations have increased yet another twenty to thirty times. The expanding world marketplace has been accompanied by the technological arrogance that leads governments to believe that ever-greater applications of technology and money can overcome any natural obstacle. World trade and industrial growth have resulted in massive changes in the landscape, spurred on by hungry foreign markets. Rivers are dammed to provide electricity for factories and people living in the cities, rain forests are converted to plantations, and poor soils are made productive by means of expensive chemical fertilizers, pesticides, oil-driven tractors and pumps. All Southeast Asian countries, and the vast majority of their citizens, have been drawn into the global economy and encouraged to purchase goods and services previously unavailable or unnecessary. All Southeast Asian countries (except oil-rich Brunei) have had to borrow to pay for this progress, and the international banks expect governments to repay development loans with foreign exchange. Since trade is dominated by agriculture and natural resources, governments are forced to sacrifice the products of forest, field, and ocean, often selling off their capital assets to pay the interest on the nation's loans.

Schomburgk's deer disappeared when the Thai swamps where it lived were converted to rice fields to feed people in Saudi Arabia and Brazil. The Javan tigers fell victim to plantation agriculture which brought more wealth to power brokers and financiers in Amsterdam and Jakarta than to villagers in east Java. Many other species—rhinos, elephants, wild buffalo, and Eld's deer, to name a

few—are about to disappear, directly or indirectly, at the hand of humans.

Traditional human societies are also deteriorating, and much of the complex and productive traditional knowledge which had steadily accumulated over the centuries is being lost along with the animals. Because of the changes that have come with the world marketplace, pigs are no longer effective in maintaining the ecosystem balance of the Maring people of New Guinea; the logging of east Malaysian forests is destroying the bearded pig migration which is part of an important natural and cultural cycle; the intricate Animistic hunting culture of Siberut is being destroyed by a combination of missionaries and government officials; and populations of elephants have been reduced to such a low level that brave elephant hunters such as the Kui are unable to practice their age-old skills and have been reduced to performing in circus-like exhibitions.

Many of the farmers who are selling their crops to distant markets are now wealthy enough to have television, and, if central government culture ministries permit it, prefer to watch "Dallas" rather than listen to their elders ramble on about headhunting trips and encounters with were-tigers and nature gods. Modern means of transportation, usually fueled by oil in one form or another, enable them to go to the nearest town for a chocolate bar from Switzerland, a bottle of beer from England, a can of powdered milk from the United States, an injection of penicillin from Germany, or a motorcycle from Japan.

But not everybody is fully convinced that modern ways are the best. Like most of the 2.5 million Balinese, the men of a village water committee we met grow "miracle" rice varieties, the new, more productive strains developed as part of the green revolution. But we were surprised to see that in a small corner of their *sawah* they were growing the taller traditional rice varieties that have fed Balinese for generations. The old rice, we were told by our Balinese friends, is the only form of grain that will placate the backyard nature gods.

Six hundred miles to the east, the land is too arid to grow rice, so fearless oceangoing hunters from the island of Lembata jump from the bows of fragile sailboats to drive harpoons deep into the broad backs of whales. They have been offered "progress" and have politely declined.

Once the thirty-foot-long handmade wooden boat is at sea, the

oars are shipped and the rectangular palm leaf sail is run up, while the crew of fifteen begins scanning the sea for signs of suitable large game: false killer whales, sharks, marlin, and several species of dolphins. Just about anything that swims is fair game, except for baleen whales, which are taboo. Suddenly a lone bull sperm whale about as long as the boat is sighted in the distance, recognized by the forty-five-degree angle of his blow (baleen whales normally blow straight up).

As the boat approaches the whale the crew hurriedly recites the Lord's Prayer and a Hail Mary while Alouisius Sanga, the harpooner, takes command from his bowsprit, guiding the helmsman with arm signals. Sanga, a dark, short, wiry man of thirty-two, gets set, tenses, then springs from the platform with his arm cocked. In midair he slams the harpoon home, and appears to hang momentarily suspended before landing on the back of the astonished whale. With blood gushing from its back, the whale dives, leaving Sanga treading water until he is picked up by his boat. The harpoon cable runs out quickly and, after a few tense moments, the boat is suddenly jerked under and Sanga finds himself back in the water, this time with the rest of the crew to keep him company.

After ten minutes or so the boat suddenly pops up like a cork. The whale is surfacing and it is a dangerous time—several of the village men have been killed by the whales' thrashing tails, either by direct blows or from gaping wounds caused by shrapnel-like splinters sent flying from timbers shattered by the whales' blows.

The crewmen clamber aboard their boat and start bailing out while the whale takes them on what New England whalers used to call a "Nantucket sleighride." As the whale weakens, the men pull in the rope and bring the mortally wounded giant alongside. Some of the crew jump into the water, ignoring the sharks which are attracted by the blood, and repeatedly stab the animal. Within twenty minutes the whale is dead and the hard work begins. Now the men must put their backs into towing the colossus five miles back to Lembata.

As evening approaches, the boat pulls on to the beach. Excited villagers pitch in to butcher the whale, leaving nothing to waste. Some of the meat is eaten fresh, some is dried in the sun and later traded for vegetables with other villages in the mountainous interior of the bleak island. Since sperm whale meat contains twice as much crude protein per weight as beef (60 percent vs 30 percent)