

## Island Press

Island Press has launched a major outreach campaign surrounding the publication of a new book by Alan Rabinowitz, *Life in the Valley of Death: The Fight to Save Tigers in a Land of Guns, Gold, and Greed*.

Dr. Alan Rabinowitz is director for science and exploration for the Bronx Zoo-based Wildlife Conservation Society. Dubbed the “Indiana Jones” of wildlife science, Alan has devoted – and risked – his life to protect nature’s great endangered mammals. His story is of loss and renewal in the rugged wilderness of Myanmar, home to perhaps one of the largest remaining populations of tigers, which is threatened by rampant poaching and the recent encroachment of gold prospectors.

A profile featuring the author in *The New York Times* is below.

## The New York Times

December 18, 2007

A Conversation With Alan Rabinowitz

### Zoologist Gives a Voice to Big Cats in the Wilderness

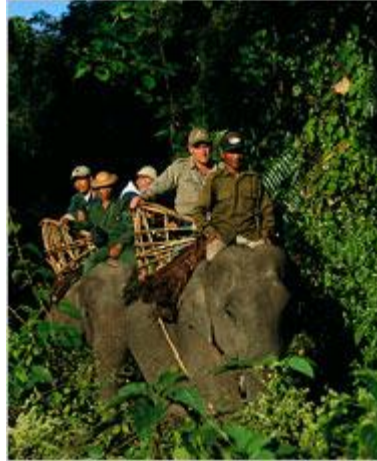
By [CLAUDIA DREIFUS](#)

Among zoologists, Alan Rabinowitz is known as the Indiana Jones of wildlife conservation. But he is actually more the Dag Hammarskjold of biology.

That is because Dr. Rabinowitz, executive director of science and exploration at the Wildlife Conservation Society, is a kind of international diplomat for big cats — jaguars, leopards, pumas.

For 20 years, he has traveled the world, imploring the power elite of democracies and dictatorships to dedicate large parcels as reserves for these imperiled felines.

In the 1980s, he persuaded the leaders of Belize to establish the world’s first jaguar preserve. More recently, this Brooklyn-born biologist prevailed on the junta in Myanmar to transform 8,400 square miles of forest into the Hukawng Valley Tiger Reserve.



Dr. Rabinowitz, 53, recounts his Burmese adventures in a new book, **“Life in the Valley of Death: The Fight to Save Tigers in the Land of Guns, Gold and Greed”** (Island Press). An edited version of a two-hour conversation in New York follows.

Q. With so many of the world’s animals in danger, why do you mostly advocate for big cats?

A. Because cats get to the human psyche. People love big cats. If I go to a government and say, “If you don’t do something quickly, you’re going to lose your tigers,” they listen. If I say, “You’re about to lose all your wolves,” they won’t care. But leopards, tigers, jaguars — people have a huge admiration for them,

My real goal is to save large sections of pristine wilderness for all types of wildlife. One way to do that is to make sure that the top predators have enough safe territory to thrive in. Because big cats need so much territory, when you save them, you’re really saving whole ecosystems and you’re saving the other animals down on the food chain. This is what’s called the “apex predator strategy” in conservation.

The other thing I’ve seen is that no government, even if they are doing a lot of development, wants to lose their big cats. Even when you’re talking to the most authoritarian of dictators, none of them wants to be the guy at the helm when the last of his country’s tigers go extinct.

Q. How does a conservationist negotiate with dictators? Do you employ special strategies?

A. I don’t go in with a plan. I just talk from my heart. These guys, they are used to people coming to them with hidden agendas. I think they can see that I don’t have any other than the wildlife.

When I first went to Burma-Myanmar, for instance, there wasn't a lot of trust there (laughs). I was told, "You don't look like a scientist." But the situation for the Burmese tiger was desperate. Between habitat destruction and hunting, they were almost gone. We did surveys, and in a lot of areas where tigers were supposed to be, you saw none. I was pretty blunt about that.

Sometimes, personal things worked for me. In 2003, I was diagnosed with a slow-growing form of leukemia. Some of the toughest leaders in the Burmese military, they just couldn't fathom why anyone with cancer was repeatedly coming to their country and going into the jungle when in their mind I should be meditating or having a more easy life. "So what if I have cancer?" I told them. "The tigers still have to have a home." I think my personal situation helped win some trust.

Q. Because of gross human-rights violations, the military government of Myanmar is under economic sanctions from the United States. There are people who wonder how you could work with such a government. What's your answer?

A. Tigers have no control over what human governments they live under. If we're going to draw lines on what is an acceptable political landscape for saving wildlife, where can we work? Wildlife always ends up taking a back seat to what's going on among humans — always. If we're going to save wildlife, I've got to give it a front seat. Nothing we do hurts the people of Burma.

But if I based conservation on what I considered moral subjectivity, I'd be doing the wildlife no favor. And we'd be virtually guaranteeing the extermination of tigers from Burma. They've been almost hunted out for their skins and for the traditional-medicine trade.

Q. How are the tigers faring since the preserve was established?

A. Tigers don't come back so quickly. When you're down to very low numbers, you have to get a male and female just even meeting. With so few, it's not easy for them to find each other. Even when you get them meeting, the young stay with the female for about three years. She doesn't breed again until those young leave her. So if the tigers are coming back, we won't know it for a few more years.

For the meanwhile — since hunting has been banned and since we've started some economic development projects for the local people — there's been an increase in the prey-species that tigers eat: wild pigs and sambar deer. We've set up "camera traps" on animal trails where you can photograph everything that passes. We haven't seen a lot of tigers yet.

Q. We understand that you've been trying to negotiate with the North Koreans to set up a wildlife sanctuary.

A. In the Demilitarized Zone, yes. We think there are a lot of animals in there. It's forested. And because it's so heavily fortified, there isn't human settlement. We reached out to the North Koreans. We thought, why not make the DMZ into a peace park?

We first approached the North Koreans years ago to try to study the Siberian tiger that migrates into there. They wouldn't let any Americans in. We were able to get one British scientist to visit their capital city, a birdwatcher. They never allowed him out of the city. There's no story to tell there.

Q. What originally drew you to conservation?

A. As a child, I had this horrific stutter. In school, I was put in what was called the retarded classes. I was very angry that people couldn't see past the stuttering. From the second grade on, I stopped talking, except to the little green turtle and the chameleon I kept at home.

Talking to the animals, I realized they had feelings. I didn't know if they understood me. But I saw that they were exactly like me. They weren't broken, but people mistreated them because they can't communicate. I thought if these animals had a voice, people wouldn't be able to crush them and throw them away. When I was a child, I promised the animals that if I ever got my voice back, I'd be their voice.

It makes me feel whole, knowing that I'm allowing more animals to live in this world. Every time I set up a protected area, I feel I'm paying them back for helping me speak. When we got Hukawng established, I thought, all those turtles, otters and tigers, they now have a chance to live.