

Beauty and barbarity

NICK HACKWORTH | **EVENING STANDARD** | Thursday 23 December 2004 01:00 |



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The Evening Standard



Just beneath the surface of the ocean, off the eastern coast of South Africa, two vast bronze whaler sharks burst through a tight defensive ball formation of sardines, with victims caught in their mouths, the scene illuminated with rays of water filtered sunlight.

Capturing at once the sheer violence of the hunting act and the beauty of the sharks' movement, it is a worthy winner for Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2004, Doug Perrine.

The 90 images in this annual exhibition, which has been running since 1964, were whittled down from 18,500 entries, from amateurs and professionals alike. They record everything from raw animal power to the most delicate behaviour.

Many depict natural beauty, presenting the harmony and richness of the world, yet equally powerful, and just as necessary to see are those trained upon the darker side of nature and those species that are victims of human activities.

Particularly wrenching is an image of an Asian black bear trapped in a tiny cage in Hanoi, Vietnam, so that its bile can be harvested for local medicinal treatments.

Pushed up against the bars of the cage, it stares straight into the camera, its look intimating a strange and terrible knowingness.

Yet more poignant, inevitably, are the images, in the Gerald Durrell Award for Endangered Species category, of animals whose entire species might give out before the lives of the photographers who capture them here.

Particularly touching is British photographer Anup Shah's image of a solitary chimpanzee lazily strolling down a forest path in the Mahale Mountains National Park, on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in Tanzania. Simple and without cloying romanticism, it shows animal life going about its business in the wild, just as it should be.

Until 17 April 2005. Information: 020 7942 5011. ■