

# Intimate Impressions

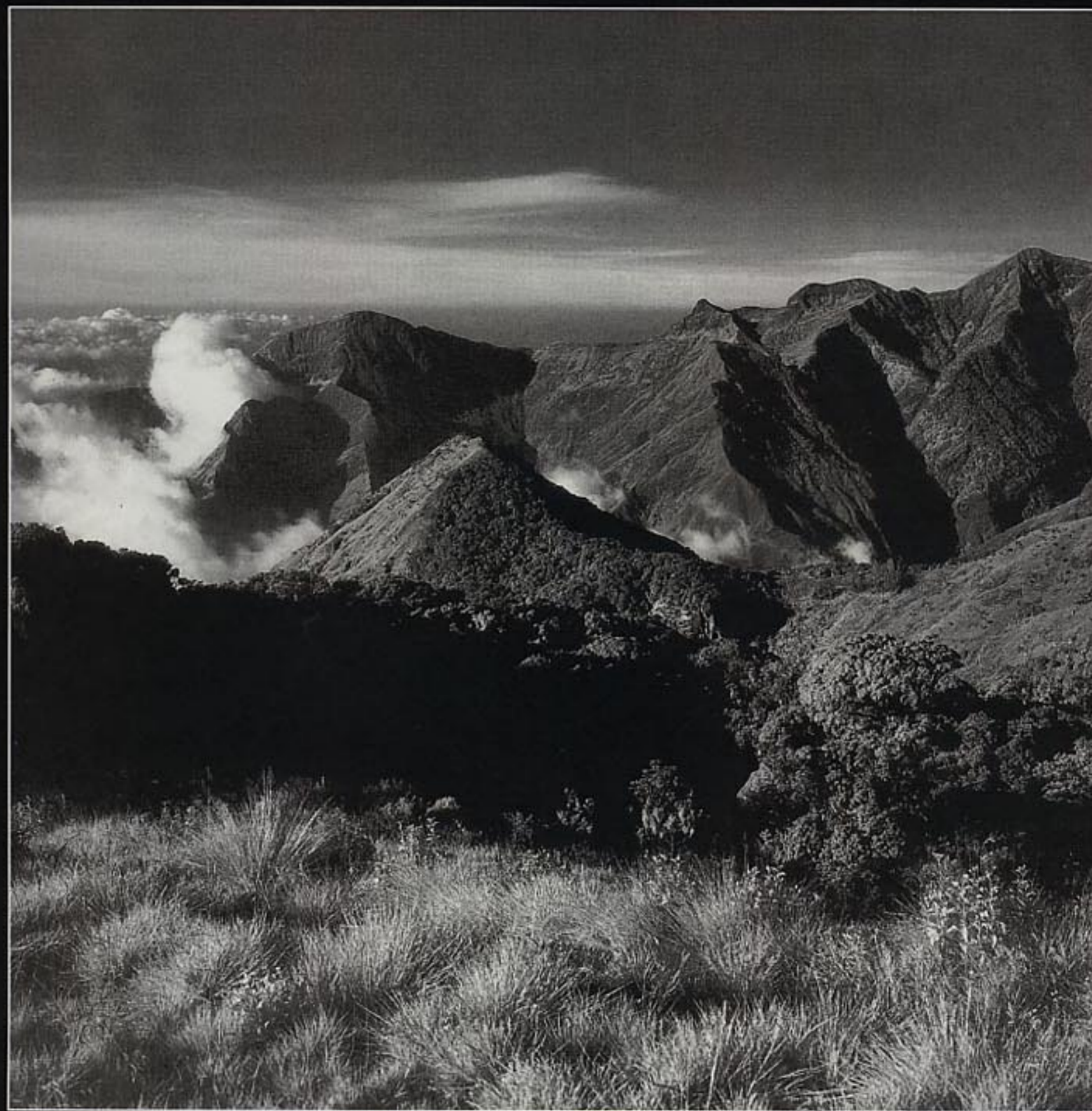
Through his black and white photographs of the Western Ghats, Ian Lockwood brings alive the breathtaking beauty of the hillscape and calls attention to its gradual destruction  
Text by Rajesh Mishra

In its special issue on environment, *Time* magazine featured photographer Ansel Adams as one of the heroes of the last century. Adams' striking black and white images of the American West inspired following generations to fight for the protection of such national parks as Yellowstone and Yosemite.

Following in the legendary photographer's footsteps is a young American photographer who is championing the cause of the Western Ghats—a unique bio-diversity hotspot that stretches 1,440 kilometres from the river Tapi north of Mumbai right up to Kanyakumari—the tip of the Indian Peninsula.

Like the master, Ian Lockwood has a great understanding of the ecology of his chosen area. He hasn't accidentally chanced upon beautiful views, it is his deep empathy for Western Ghats that lifts his art. "I guess it is hard to be a nature photographer of any substance without really understanding the environment. I strongly believe that there must be a connection between the photographer and the subject. In my experience, my most effective images are the products of an intimate experience within an environment that I have a deep connection to," he says.

Having grown up in the Western Ghats (Ian did his schooling from the American School in the Nilgiri hills), Ian has worked extensively with the Palni Hills Conservation Council in Kodaikanal. This exposure brought him in contact with the conservation issues of the Western Ghats. Documentation of habitat destruction, and scenes of natural beauty are the cornerstones of his current body of work. "Photography has long served dual purposes for me. It is primarily an artistic expression in which I take what I see around me, interpret it and present it in the



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British period when large areas of virgin tropical forest were cleared for tea, coffee and spice gardens. Throughout the 20th century, natural vegetation was replaced on a massive scale with the introduction of exotic (non-native) tree species in the hills of the Western Ghats. Most visitors now mistake eucalyptus, pine and wattle trees for a part of the hill-station landscape, when in fact they are dangerous invaders! These plantations of exotic trees have been one of the major factors in restricting the flow of streams in the dry season," points out the photographer.

The Western Ghats acts as a giant sponge absorbing the monsoon rains and releasing the water in the ensuing drier months. Eastwards flowing rivers like the Kaveri and Krishna are two of the larger rivers fed by the Western Ghats. When natural vegetation in the form of forests and grasslands has been

destroyed and replaced by plantations and other human interventions, the mountains give less to the plains.

Through his evocative black and white photographs, Ian succeeds in presenting the landscape of the region in a similar manner to Adams' monumental style. His understanding of the subject and deft handling of the medium combine potently. Shooting mostly in 35 mm, 6x6 and panoramic formats, Ian's images reflect a sense of wonder. Nature's primary elements—sky, water, landscape and light—coalesce as part of a sublime union in his photography. They mirror nature in its ideal state, in keeping with a major tradition of American landscape photography—that of transcendentalism.

While pursuing a degree in Development Economics, aside from Adams, he was greatly inspired by Mary Ellen Mark's work on social issues. Brazilian Sabastio Salgado, an economist-turned-creator of exquisite black and white images depicting Third World problems, is another who has had a lasting impression. Says Ian: "All these photographers have, or were, intimately connected to their subjects and used their work to highlight a larger cause. In my work on India's Western Ghats, I strive for a similar goal." ■

form of published works or final prints in an exhibition. Equally important is the effectiveness of the photographs in communicating a message of ecological conservation. In my images, I hope to present a message of conservation and ecological awakening," says Ian.

Not so long ago, Ian held an exhibition—his first ever—at New Delhi's India International Centre. Now plans are underway to take the exhibition—*The Western Ghats: Portraits & Panorama*—to two cities (Mumbai and Bangalore) that lie close to this unique ecosystem. When an artist of such exceptional talent lifts his camera, the message reaches its audience in no uncertain terms. His argument to save the Western Ghats is visual. Through his pictures, Ian brings alive the breathtaking beauty of the Ghats and its gradual destruction of the area.

A bio-diversity hotspot is an area of exceptional plant, animal, and microbe wealth that is under threat from human activities. The Western Ghats, one of two bio-diversity hotspots in India (the other being the Eastern Himalayan state of Arunachal Pradesh), are blessed with an abundance of life forms found nowhere else on earth.

"The forested areas of India changed during the