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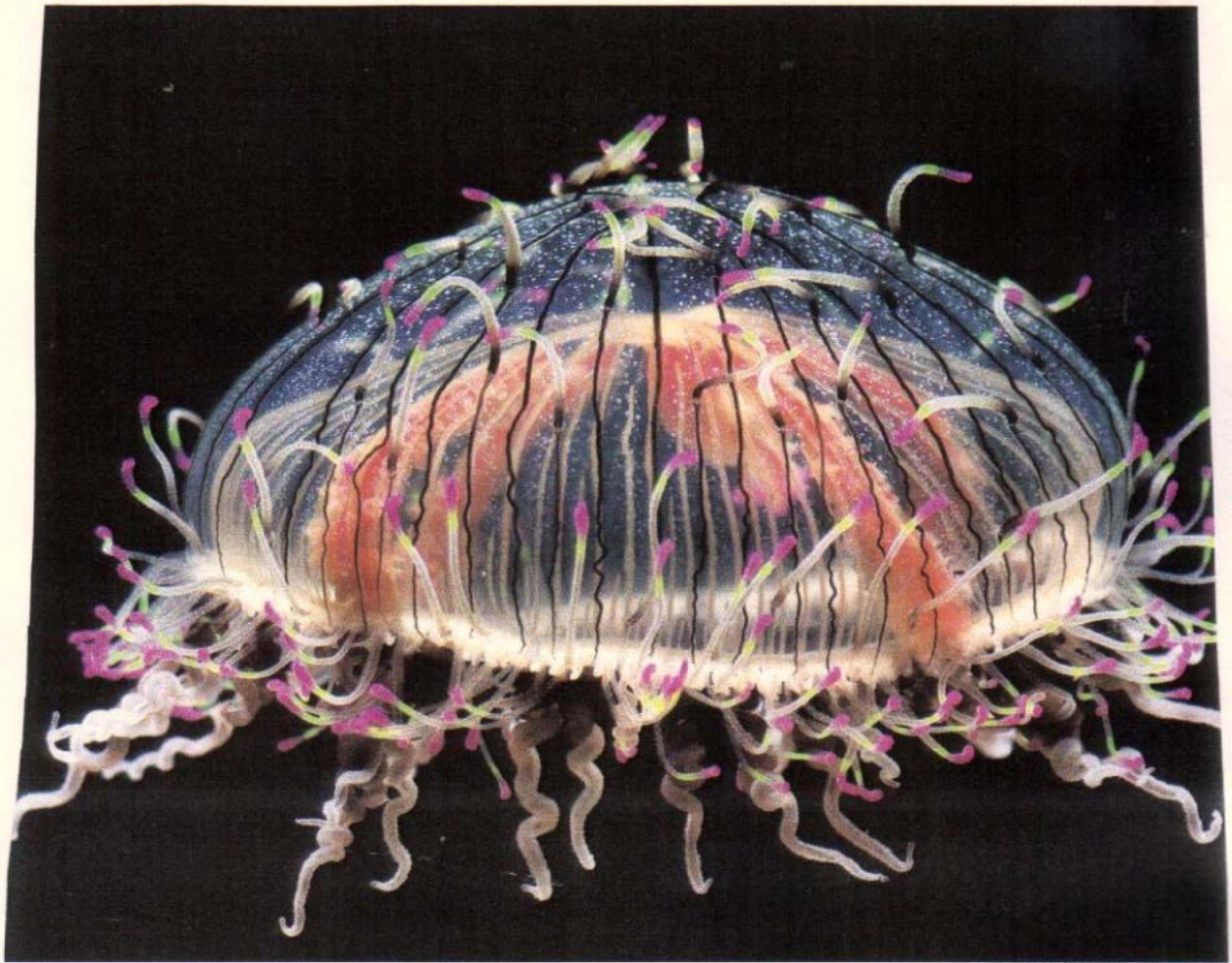
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LANTING'S

**FRANS LANTING'S
MULTIMEDIA VISION NEATLY
PRESENTS 13 BILLION YEARS
IN 175 PHOTOGRAPHS.
BY EDGAR ALLEN BEEM**

Celebrated nature photographer Frans Lanting was photographing horseshoe crabs on Delaware Bay in 1999 for a story on biodiversity when he had what he calls "a sudden flash of imagination." As he watched the ancient, armored creatures crawl from the sea, as they have been doing for 400 million years, Lanting imagined trying to interpret the entire history of life on Earth in photographs.

"Typically, photography is preoccupied with the



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BOOK OF LIFE

present. It's implicit in the whole process—photography and photographers capture the present," says Lanting from his studio in Santa Cruz, California. "For this project, my goal was different. I wanted to visualize the past. It became a tour de force, because I was not just looking back in time but trying to capture situations that were unpolluted, direct impressions of things that happened over huge periods of time so that every image was a just a slice."

Seven years later, the result of Lanting's epochal

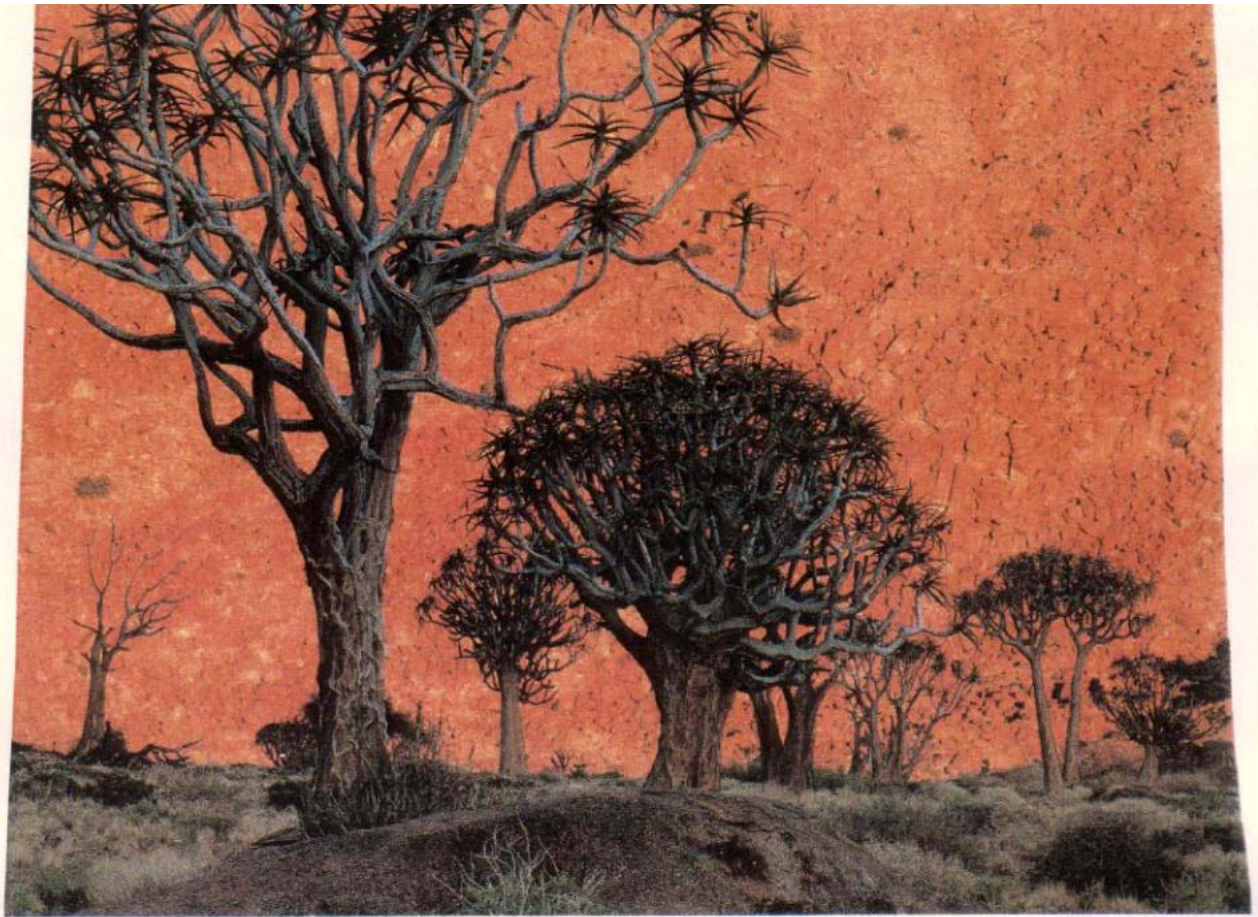
Opposite page, top: Frans Lanting and Christine Eckstrom on the rim of an active volcano, Hawaii. Opposite, bottom: Lanting. Above: The book covers early life forms like the Flower Hat Jelly, photographed at Monterey Bay Aquarium, California.

vision is *Life: A Journey Through Time* (Taschen, 2006), a gloriously lyrical interpretation of the evolution of life in 175 stunning color photographs. The images range from a cross-section of petrified wood, representing the birth of the universe 13.7 billion years ago, to a cross-section of the human brain representing the arrival of modern *Homo sapiens* just

200,000 years ago. In between, Lanting presents a fantastic chronological selection of geological, microbiological, botanical and wildlife images that evoke the emergence of life forms on the planet.

Though Lanting was able to draw, in part on his own extensive archive of wildlife images for some of the story, the majority of his *LIFE* photographs are

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new and never before seen. Often piggybacking on editorial assignments, he traveled from America to Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and Antarctica in search of images that would accomplish his goal to "untangle nature from its entwinements in the present and make the origins clear."

"When you look at nature through the perspective of time, everything changes," Lanting explains. "Plants and animals that aren't high on the scale of being considered popular or important become important. The animals we tend to care about—polar bears, pandas, penguins—are all preposterously recent arrivals."

And so Lanting instead presents moon jellyfish from the Monterey Bay Aquarium that arrived 580 million years ago, coral polyps (550 million years)

from the Great Barrier Reef, which ferns (470 million years) emerging from volcanic lava in Hawaii, and horseshoe crabs (400 million years) on the Jersey shore right on down through tree shrews (87 million years) in Borneo to chimpanzees (2.5 million years) in Kenya.

Nikon was a major sponsor of Lanting's *Life* project, and Lanting used a Nikon F6 when shooting film and the Nikon D1, D2X and D200 when shooting digital. Given the range of subject matter, from landscapes to wildlife action shots and microscopic diatoms to specimens from natural history museums, the book has a remarkable visual consistency that is a testament to both careful editing and processing.

"We came up with a look that was consistent yet

very faithful to the originals," says Lanting. "We did very little enhancing, because I wanted the book to be rooted in an authentic reality."

Lanting did not limit *Life: A Journey Through Time* only to the printed page, however. The project also includes a multimedia orchestral performance with music by composer Philip Glass and narration by actor Peter Coyote, a Web site <www.LifeThroughTime.com>, and a traveling exhibition that opened in September at Naturalis, the National Museum of Natural History of the Netherlands. For the museum opening, Lanting blew up a photograph of a spadefoot frog peering out of the red mud of the Australian desert to a size of 100 by 40 feet so that it could be seen from the train running between The Hague and Amsterdam.

Born in Rotterdam in 1951, Lanting, 55, first came to the United States at 21 to visit the national parks.

Above: Quiver Trees, Richtersveld National Park, South Africa. Lanting did little retouching, but added emphasis by framing a rocky background, instead of blue sky, behind the trees.

Travel + Environment Issue

After earning a degree in environmental economics at Erasmus University in the Netherlands, he returned to the United States to do post-graduate studies in environmental planning at the University of California in Santa Cruz. He and his wife and partner Christine Eckstrom, who edited *Life: A Journey Through Time*, have lived there ever since.

Lanting got his start as a wildlife photographer photographing sanderlings on the coast of California. Over the past 25 years, he has become one of the world's premier nature photographers. His previous books include *Madagascar, A World Out of Time* (1990), *Forgotten Edens* (1993), *Okavango, Africa's Last Eden* (1993), *Bonobo, The Forgotten Ape* (1997), *Eye to Eye: Intimate Encounters with the Animal World* (1997), *Living Planet* (1999), *Penguin* (1999) and *Jungles* (2000). His photographs have won him honors ranging from World Press Photo awards to the Sierra Club's Ansel Adams Award, Sweden's Lennart Nilsson Award, and induction into the Royal Order of the Golden Ark, the Netherlands' highest conservation honor.

"I have a strong sense of mission," says Lanting of his calling as a nature photographer, "but it's not so much bridging the wild and the civilized. It's more an attempt to bridge the gap between the scientific understanding of life and the general public's appreciation of nature. If you want to lure people into the scientific view of life, you have to take away the intimidation factor."

By presenting a visual panorama of the evolution, Lanting hopes "to distill the extraordinary advances in the scientific understanding of life on Earth." *Life: A Journey Through Time* accomplishes this with extraordinary beauty, yet the subtext of Lanting's project is that this natural beauty is fragile and everywhere endangered by human enterprise.

"If you go back and journey through time billions of years and arrive at the present and measure the damage we have caused on the planet just in the past 100 years, the conclusion can only be that this is not sustainable," he says. "There will always be bacteria. I'm not worried about them. It's us we should be concerned about. I'm not a futurist, but human beings are an interesting novelty on the face of the Earth. We haven't been around that long. It's going to be a race against time, that I do know. We don't have 100 years to turn this around."

Lanting's next project is a cruise along the east coast of Greenland to photograph "naked ground that hasn't been seen" as global warming melts glaciers and sea ice retreats. "I really believe photography can be a powerful language if you connect the images to stories," he says. "I like to create images that are a window on the world to make people fall into a world they never knew existed and, ultimately, feel connected with it." □



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Clockwise from top: Eckstrom observing early life in Yellowstone; Desert Spadefoot frog, Central Australia; Diatoms from Farlow Herbarium, Harvard University, Massachusetts; Impala, Masai Mara National Reserve, Kenya.

