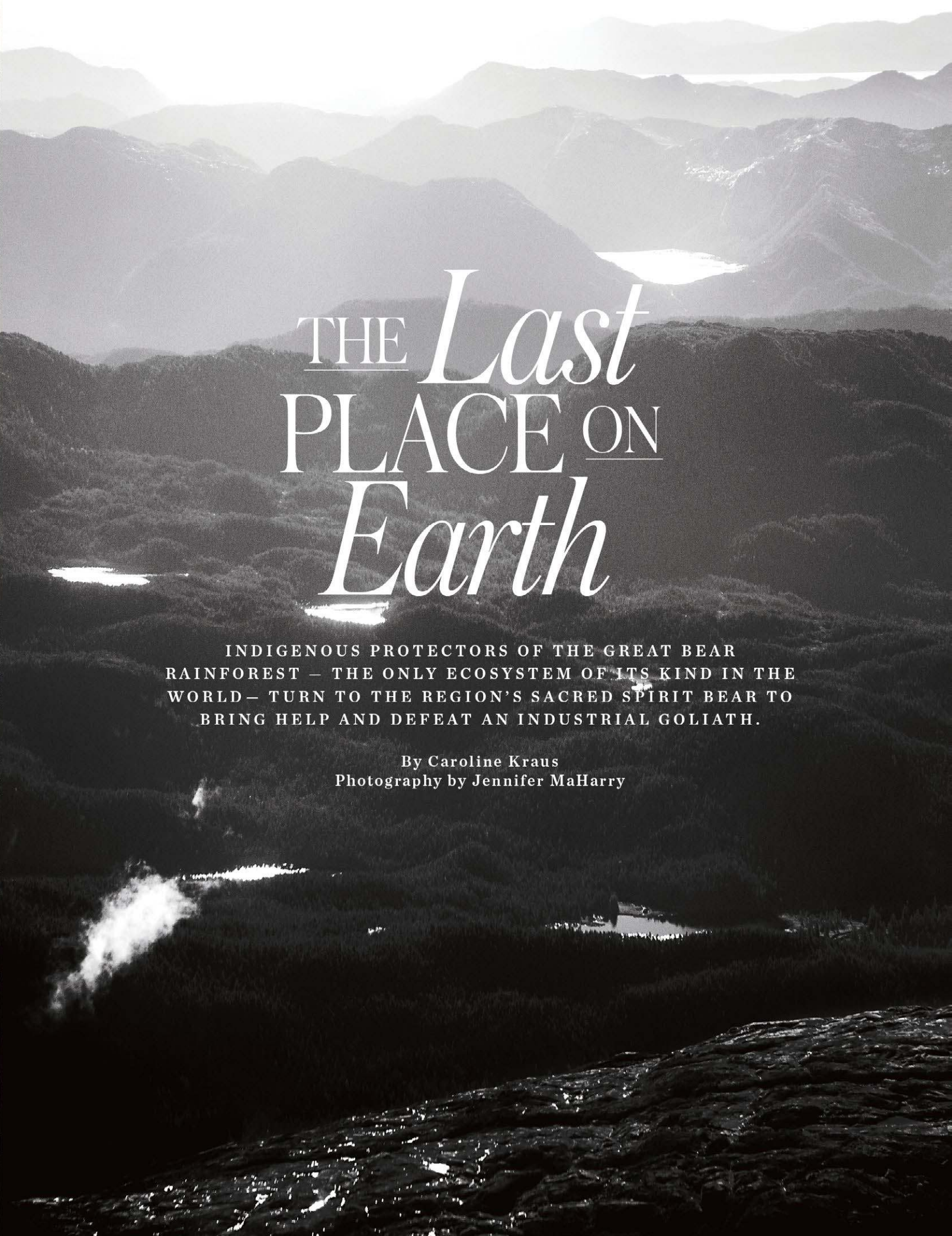




The Great Bear Rainforest is sometimes called the Amazon of the North. Waterfalls, 1,000-year-old cedars, moss-covered mountains and glacier-cut, 800-foot-deep fjords make up this pristine ecosystem. It's home to many First Nations communities and abundant wildlife, including the extremely rare Kermode bear — known as the Spirit Bear.



THE *Last* PLACE ON *Earth*

INDIGENOUS PROTECTORS OF THE GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST — THE ONLY ECOSYSTEM OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD — TURN TO THE REGION'S SACRED SPIRIT BEAR TO BRING HELP AND DEFEAT AN INDUSTRIAL GOLIATH.

By Caroline Kraus
Photography by Jennifer MaHarry

When I heard from photographer Jennifer MaHarry that she was going to be packing her cameras for the Great Bear Rainforest, the first thing I pictured was tropical terrain. When she mentioned landing in British Columbia, I went to find a map.

In today's hyperconnected world, it's refreshing to discover there is yet a place few people have heard of. This is especially true when the place is a vast wilderness with a uniquely diverse ecosystem, knitted through a network of small islands and coastline. The Great Bear is in fact the largest temperate rainforest in the world, covering nearly 21 million acres along 250 miles between Vancouver and Alaska. It is home to indigenous nations that have thrived there for thousands of years in a symbiotic relationship with the ocean, land and wildlife. For centuries, these communities had avoided falling prey to industrial development, in part because the region is so remote but also because they successfully guarded their traditional territories from outside eyes and interests. That is, until 2008, when a gas and oil delivery company set their sights on a new market and made their interests known.

A Crude Plan

Enbridge is Canada's largest energy delivery company, and their interests lay in constructing a pipeline that would run straight through the heart of the Great Bear, carrying half a million barrels of tar sands per day to the port town of Kitimat, while a second pipeline would deliver natural gas condensate back to Alberta to dilute the tar sands crude.

This plan assumed a few things. First, that supertankers the size of skyscrapers would somehow thread rainforest's narrow fjords and intricate maze of islands without disaster. Second, that the company's promise of contingency plans for inevitable oil spills would be reassuring. And third, that it was acceptable to channel pipes through hundreds of streams and rivers, threatening fragile spawning habitat for salmon, the lifeblood of the Great Bear.

The Coastal First Nations reacted with force. "We are here to tell you today that all of the communities are opposed to

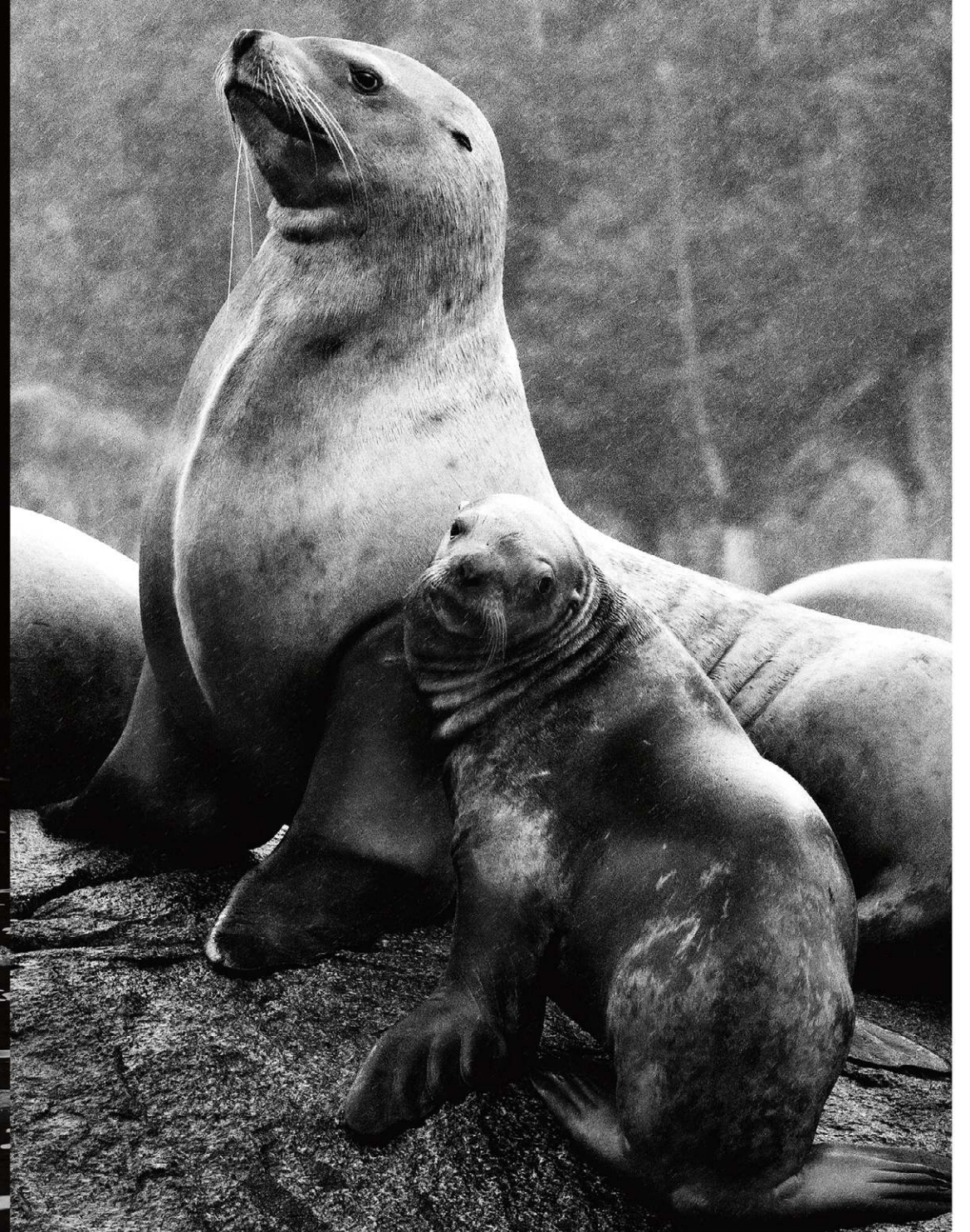
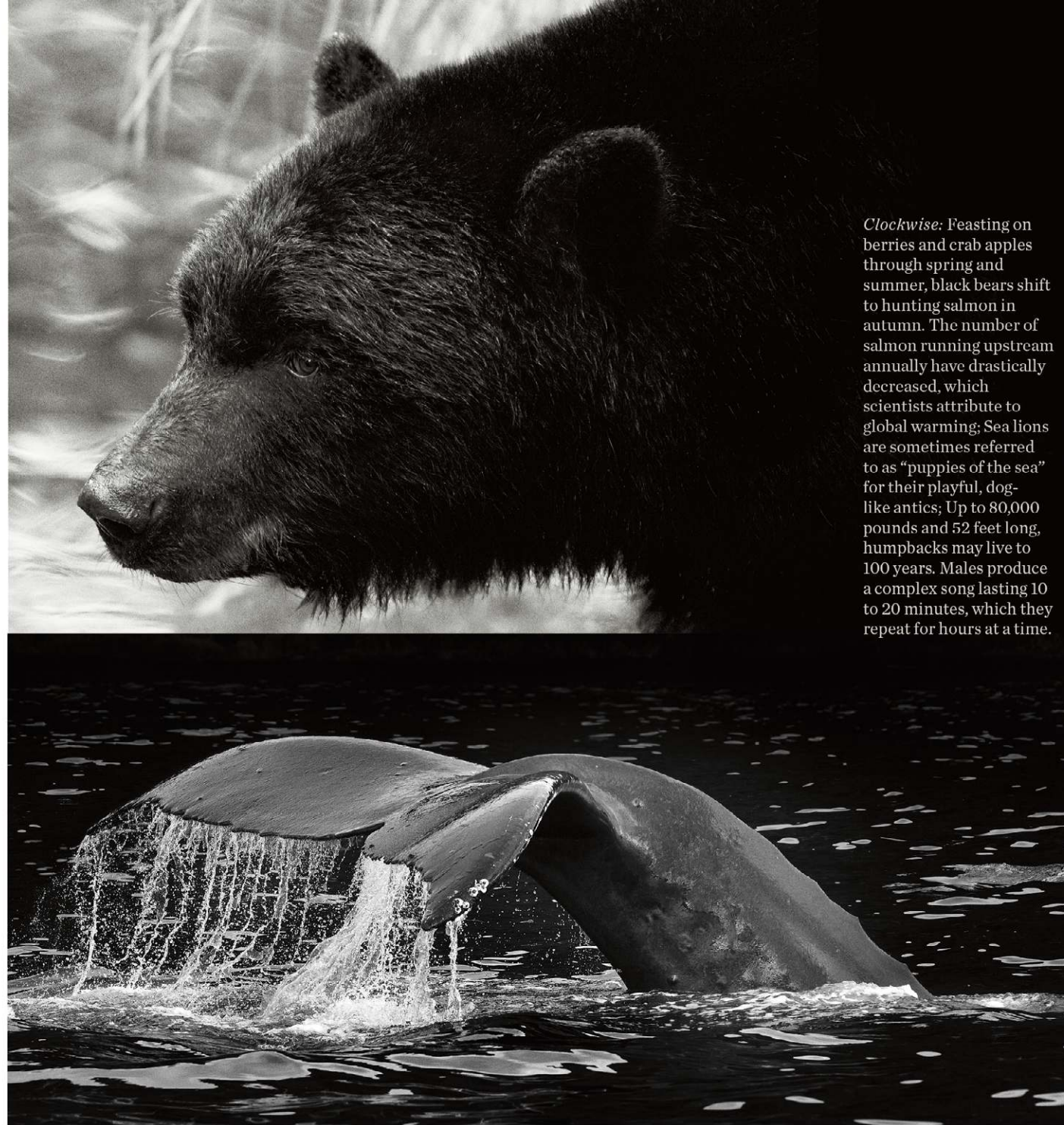
Enbridge," Coastal First Nations Executive Director Art Sterritt said to gathered journalists and citizens. "If we had a tanker accident on the coast of BC it would literally wipe out all of our cultures."

For the Gitga'at Nation, whose territory covers two-thirds of the Douglas Channel where the supertankers would navigate, the potential impact was alarming. The nearby feeding and migration route for humpback whales and orcas is one of the most productive habitats for these animals in the world. Between the noise and potential ship strikes, those waters would become minefields. The National

Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reports that ship strikes are among the biggest threats to marine mammals, and the humpbacks would be especially vulnerable because they migrate and feed along the coast. It's further known through studies and observation that shipping noise causes stress and trauma to marine animals, and disrupts their ability to communicate.

Despite these scenarios and overwhelming local opposition, the pipeline was approved by the Canadian government in 2013, along with "209 conditions" that nevertheless opened the door to oil spills,

Clockwise: Feasting on berries and crab apples through spring and summer, black bears shift to hunting salmon in autumn. The number of salmon running upstream annually have drastically decreased, which scientists attribute to global warming; Sea lions are sometimes referred to as "puppies of the sea" for their playful, dog-like antics; Up to 80,000 pounds and 52 feet long, humpbacks may live to 100 years. Males produce a complex song lasting 10 to 20 minutes, which they repeat for hours at a time.



ocean noise, habitat destruction and deep losses for First Nation communities.

"To have this project come through was a direct threat to our way of life," the chief councilor of the Heiltsuk Nation, Marilyn Slett, recalls. "If a project threatens our sustainability and way of life, we will exercise all tools to protect it. And that's what it came down to with Enbridge, because our voices were not heard."

From Outsiders to Allies

The outcry was swift and loud. People from across the province came together to raise

funds for legal challenges launched by eight First Nations. Residents who had long kept away outsiders, now reached out to those who could give voice to their forests, animals and waters. As journalists, photographers and conservationists were guided to the very regions that had once been off-limits, news stories and images began reaching far and wide.

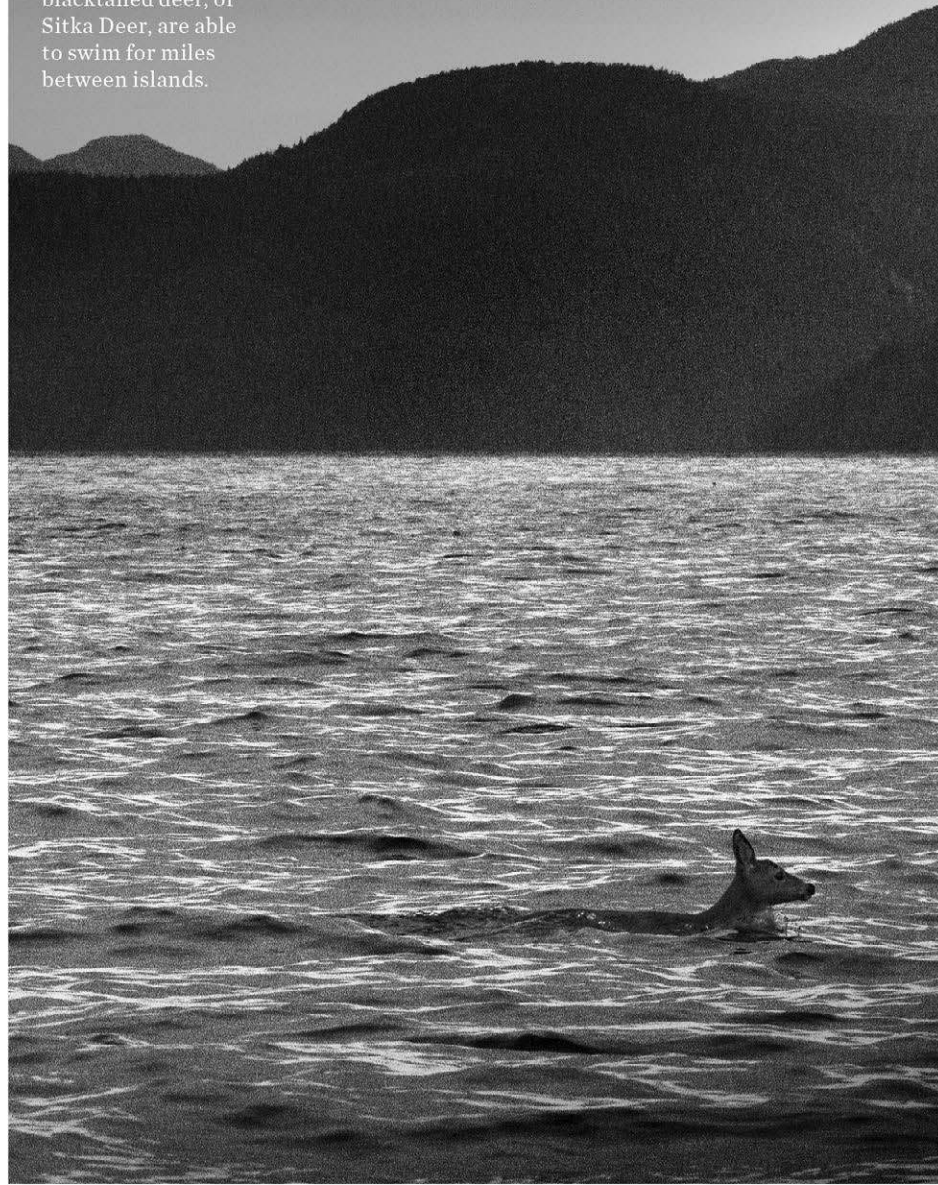
For Jennifer MaHarry, the experience was unforgettable. "Coming in on a float plane, I looked down on emerald green mountains, streams and fjords that seemed to go on forever without a single sign of a human. Witnessing this grand scope of

endless wilderness, I realized just how much was at stake for the environment, and for the First Nations people who depend on the sea."

When Chief Councilor Slett describes those stakes, generations before her seem to rise in her voice. "These coastal communities are inseparable from the land and the sea. These animals, forests and waters are the source of our stories, our history, our dances. This place is who we are, as a people."

It is a place of rare ecological balance. As summers turn to fall, black bears chase salmon through cascading rivers while

A subspecies of the mule deer, blacktailed deer, or Sitka Deer, are able to swim for miles between islands.



raptors watch and wait for the carcasses left behind. Those carcasses offer rich nutrients for the spruce, hemlock and cedars, which in turn provide habitat and oxygen. Cougars range freely in these ancient forests, and at higher elevations, shaggy mountain goats perch on sheer rock. Sitka deer swim between islands, and sea otters dart and roll as sea lions slumber on rocks along the misty coast. Further out, orcas and humpbacks rise and breach, as back on shore coastal gray wolves trot along riverbeds looking for their share of salmon.

Among them, spoken of only in whispers, lives the treasured guardian of the rainforest, an elusive legend known as “mooksgm’ol,” or “Spirit Bear” in the Tsimshian language. This black bear with a surprising white coat carries a rare gene that

gives one in ten this ghostly appearance. Fewer than 400 are said to exist, primarily on Gribbell Island on Gitga’at Territory. Until recently, natives never spoke of Spirit Bears for fear of risking their safety. It’s hard to imagine the pressure these communities must have felt to bring outsiders into such a sacred space. Perhaps it was the Spirit Bear who helped ensure that these outsiders became allies who helped build an impenetrable wall of opposition.

Many Paddles, One Canoe

Enbridge may have had deeper pockets, more lobbyists and creative ways to depict giant tankers traveling through photoshopped waterways, but in the end they did not have enough power to scale that wall. Citizens joined First Nations

in a tidal wave of protests. The British Columbia Supreme Court upheld a legal challenge by the Gitga’at and Coastal First Nations, and the Federal Court of Appeal ruled that the government had failed in its duty to consult with First Nations. In 2016, Canada’s new prime minister, Justin Trudeau, put it plainly: “The Great Bear Rainforest is no place for a pipeline.” After directing the National Energy Board to dismiss the project, he issued a moratorium on all oil tanker traffic throughout the north Pacific coast.

For the Last to Last

The survival of the Great Bear Rainforest represents one of the last hopes for a planet where wilderness areas are declining at an alarming rate, along with the biodiversity that’s essential to all life. By bearing witness and speaking up, a movement coalesced, turning back an industrial goliath.

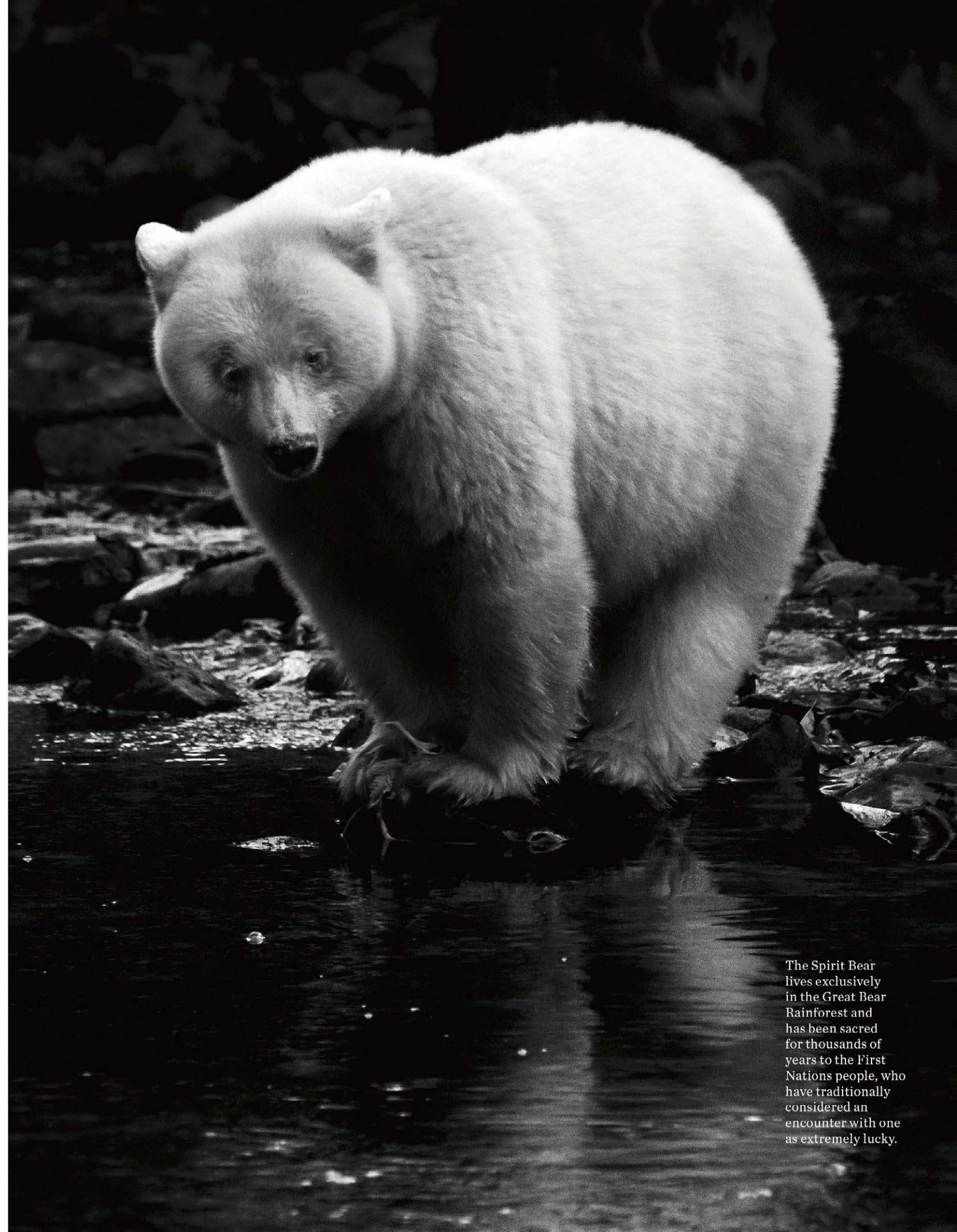
Looking ahead, Chief Councilor Slett is cautiously hopeful. “I think that the greatest thing that came out of Enbridge was building such strong alliances,” she says. “Now the coastal communities and general public stand together to say, yes, this place... this way of life, needs to be protected.”

MaHarry was with Gitga’at guide Marven Robinsen when the essence of this alliance came into focus for her. “We were waiting quietly along a stream bank,” she recalls. “Eagles soared above using wind currents, and the excitement was palpable. But then, after a few hours, I started to have doubts that we would see a Spirit Bear. And it was exactly then that she appeared out of the shadowy trees, squinting in the dappled light. She was gentle and beautiful. I lay still, and she walked right toward me.

‘Don’t... move,’ Marven said quietly. And then she walked alongside me, inches away, nearly stepping on me, but ever so careful not to.”

The resulting photographs from that moment evoke the sacredness of this unique place where life coexists in cooperative balance. If this really is the last place on Earth where such an exquisite complement of human and animal life exists, surely it is the last place on Earth to lay a pipeline. ▣

Caroline Kraus is a writer and documentary filmmaker who founded the multimedia series Moments of Truth Project. Jennifer MaHarry’s fine art animal photography has raised thousands of dollars for environmental causes through G2 Gallery in Venice, CA. Prints are available at maharry.com.



The Spirit Bear lives exclusively in the Great Bear Rainforest and has been sacred for thousands of years to the First Nations people, who have traditionally considered an encounter with one as extremely lucky.