



# OBSERVING WILDLIFE IN TROPICAL FORESTS

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1: A Geosemeiotic Approach

Nils Lindahl Elliot

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Volume 1: A Geosemeiotic Approach

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Tropical forests loom large in modern imaginaries of nature. Like the tropics more generally, the forests and their wildlife have long been the subjects of anthropomorphic projections combining fear and fascination. Beginning the last quarter of the twentieth century, tropical *rain* forests in particular became the subject of a global public relations campaign, with ecologists striving to save the forests by highlighting their species biodiversity. At about the same time, conservationists in Central America and then in other regions began to promote 'ecological tourism' in the forests. As a result, many tropical forests became destinations for a growing number of tourists.

In a groundbreaking study, Nils Lindahl Elliot offers a theoretical and historical account of the forces that shape the observational practices of tourists visiting tropical forests – in particular the tropical moist forests in the lowland regions of the Neotropics. In this, the first of two volumes, the author develops a transdisciplinary approach that combines ecological, geographic, semiotic, sociological and anthropological perspectives to explain tourists' observational practices. Key to the approach is an account of the roles played by the nature media, a shorthand for a field of mass communication devoted to producing popular representations of wildlife. While the nature media field has often been regarded as a natural ally of conservationist and environmentalist activists, the present study makes the case that the field's representations play a more ambiguous role. Even as they portray the wonder of tropical forests and their wild denizens, the representations transform forest and fauna into objects of symbolic consumption. As part of this process, the representations portray the forests with an intensity that can seldom if ever be matched by actual, *in situ* wildlife observation. This irony constitutes a key problem for the inquiry, which develops an account of what the author describes as immediate, dynamical, and mediate modes of wildlife observation.

Volume 2 engages in a genealogical inquiry about tourism and techniques of observation in the site where the overall research began: Barro Colorado Island, an internationally renowned biological reserve in the Republic of Panama. In 2007, Nils Lindahl Elliot conducted extensive ethnographic research with tourists visiting the island's forest and its biological field station, which is managed by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI). The fieldwork went on to become a part of the basis for this historical inquiry into the island reserve, the station managed by the Smithsonian, and the techniques of observation employed by guides and visitors touring the island's trails.

This study will be of interest to anyone keen to better understand tourists' interpretations of tropical forests and their wildlife. Written in a propaedeutic style that contextualises key concepts and research paradigms, the work will be particularly relevant to two broad groups of readers: on the one hand, scientists, managers of biological reserves, environmental educators and media producers who wish to develop a more critical approach to the conservation of tropical forests; and on the other hand, students and scholars with an interest in what the author describes as a *geosemeiotic* approach to wildlife observation.