



Dr. Roberta Bondar’s captivating landscape photographs include (from top): the pink granite shores of Lake Superior’s Pukaskwa National Park; the rusty red cliffs at Prince Edward Island National Park; the fall splendour of a sugar maple photographed for a project called Toronto Tree Portraits; and an undisturbed swath of boreal forest in Prince Albert National Park in Saskatchewan.

The square photo of trees reflected in a pond in King Township, Ont., (page 15) is an example of her work with a Hasselblad camera, the format on which Dr. Bondar is now focusing.



All photos courtesy of The Roberta Bondar Foundation

# LIFE

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## Developing a passion for nature

Dr. Roberta Bondar uses her arresting photography to inspire others to appreciate and protect the environment

BY CAROL HILTON

The opportunity to see firsthand the swirling blue and white expanse of our planet from space is a privilege few experience. For Dr. Roberta Bondar, who became Canada’s first female astronaut in space aboard the shuttle Discovery 20 years ago, it forever altered her perspective.

“Seeing the Earth in colour from space . . . pleased my eye, pleased my brain,” she says. “I liken it to the first time I looked through a microscope and saw cells. Seeing the structure of the planet—in the reality of that moment, I made a personal connection.”

And after returning to life on terra firma, her altered vantage point would also set her on the path of a new mission to help others appreciate our natural world—and motivate them to protect it—through the lens of photography.

Growing up in Sault Ste. Marie amid the rugged landscapes of northern Ontario, Dr. Bondar discovered photography as the perfect creative companion for her fascination with science and love



Dr. Roberta Bondar has been able to parlay her experience as an astronaut into programs that help children and adults connect with nature.

of nature. From her mother, she inherited the gifts of curiosity and enthusiasm for life; through her father, she was exposed to cameras. Dr. Bondar remembers her father adored anything technical and would borrow photographic equipment from her uncle, a pharmacist who also served as the local sales rep for Nikon and Leica.

Finding the physics of vision intriguing, the future neurologist used her Brownie Hawkeye camera to capture what she saw in nature and share it with others to see their reactions.

Reflecting a lifelong passion for learning, Dr. Bondar also used photography in her early biological studies. She discovered that by snapping a picture of a butterfly’s chrysalis, she could use the image to identify the species hidden inside.

“Photography helped me fuse art and science at a young age,” Dr. Bondar says. “It was always a tool I wanted to use as part of what I was doing.”

Indeed, photography has been an integral part of Dr. Bondar’s career at every stage, from photo microscopy employed in her PhD program to her training on 13 different camera types for her





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space flight, including IMAX.

After her time as an astronaut, Dr. Bondar continued to make strides in her neurological research with NASA on the brain's recovery from microgravity and the implications it had for conditions such as Parkinson's disease and strokes. But she also started to take on a more prominent role as an environmental ambassador, helping the Ontario government to develop programming for environmental education and working with the United Nations on a number of campaigns.

Dr. Bondar was developing her expertise as a nature photographer at the same time, undertaking training at the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, Calif., and travelling the globe to take otherworldly images of extreme landscapes. Her stunning photographs from across the



planet have been showcased in a number of exhibitions and in several full-colour books, including one volume on our national parks that was the culmination of two and a half years of cross-Canada travel.

Then, in 2009, Dr. Bondar decided to pour some of her considerable energy into a new endeavour. She established her charity, The Roberta Bondar

Foundation, with the goal of educating people of all ages about the environment and inspiring them to become stewards of the planet.

**Duty to inspire**

Following her space flight, she felt it was part of her "public trust" to use her astronaut fame to inspire people and improve society. She donated all of her

Photography helped me fuse science and art at a young age.

—Dr. Roberta Bondar

images to the foundation to produce a travelling art exhibit, and created the Bondar Challenge to encourage school children to explore the natural world by having them venture out with cameras and capture their own images.

"More people will visit an art gallery than a science museum. We're trying to get people interested in the artistic dimension

of landscapes and photographs as a way of getting them interested in the environment."

Dr. Bondar recalls visiting one school and seeing a photograph a young girl took of a lone birch tree, set apart on one side of the image, with the title, "It's OK to be different." She says that tells her the project let the child connect with the world in a way that was not intimidating. Another student said that for the first time, she realized nature "wasn't just green," and another young photographer focused on the fact that garbage was not meant to be a part of nature.

The foundation's educational efforts continue to expand. The Bondar Summer Camp Challenge will launch this summer as a pilot project that, similar to the program in schools, will see children at five camps in Ontario use cameras to explore their environment and develop an affinity for nature. The dynamic Dr. Bondar will also be back behind the lens this summer on a photographic expedition to the near Arctic, and then a trip to Africa in the fall.

And though Dr. Bondar recalls a cynic criticizing her once for "dining out a lot on her astronaut experience," she says without vanity that she believes "we need to have heroes to inspire us to make society better. . . . I enjoy doing the work. It is a different way of touching people's lives (outside of medicine). I can have an impact on education because of my space flight. I can stretch myself to the whole country." And she has.

If you would like to arrange for Dr. Bondar's travelling exhibition to come to your town, contact The Roberta Bondar Foundation at [info@therobertabondarfoundation.org](mailto:info@therobertabondarfoundation.org).



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