



ECOCAMP PATAGONIA TRAVELERS' TALES - IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE PUMA

"This is a wild animal, but it's a beautiful animal and not what they (the news) says it is." (James Kao)

When imagining the puma, many imagine a frightening animal bent on asserting its superiority over humans. After all, pumas - or mountain lions as they are also known - receive a lot of bad press. But sceptics and animal lovers agree that when given the privilege of spending time close to the puma in its natural habitat, our preconceived ideas are challenged, replaced instead by the memory of observing a powerful wild animal go about its life, completely unmoved by our presence. However, we cannot claim to be unmoved by theirs.

For Californian photographer James Kao, spending four days in Torres del Paine tracking the puma was the start of a love affair with both animal and habitat. While originally his "main dish", James' tracking experience only whet his appetite for more Torres del Paine adventure and convinced him to lace up his boots for the 7-Day W Trek: another chance to photograph the national park's fauna and explore its transcendent landscapes.

"We try to get as close as we can to the puma, so we can get good photographs, but not interfere with

them." (James Kao)

Though pumas also roam the mountains of his home state, James was awed by South America's big cat, as those found in Torres del Paine pumas are larger, more powerful-looking, and more commonly seen.

[The photographs \(http://www.patagonia.travel/tracking-puma-james-kao/\)](http://www.patagonia.travel/tracking-puma-james-kao/) James took that day depict pumas in the context of their everyday life amongst the contours and plains of their southern home: caring for their cubs, returning from a hunt, resting, stretching, preening, playing.

"I wanted to get to know these animals for what they really are, just beautiful creatures worthy of our respect." (James Kao)

The experience of this close, respectful observation stirred James both creatively and emotionally, reminding him of our duty to protect our planet's rare fauna and fight against horrific events such as poaching, habitat clearing, and illegal killings, such as that of Zimbabwe's Cecil the lion. Pumas, like elephants, tigers, gorillas, pandas, and so many more of the world's most iconic animals, rely on our species to begin to show respect for their right to a peaceful existence on our shared planet.

