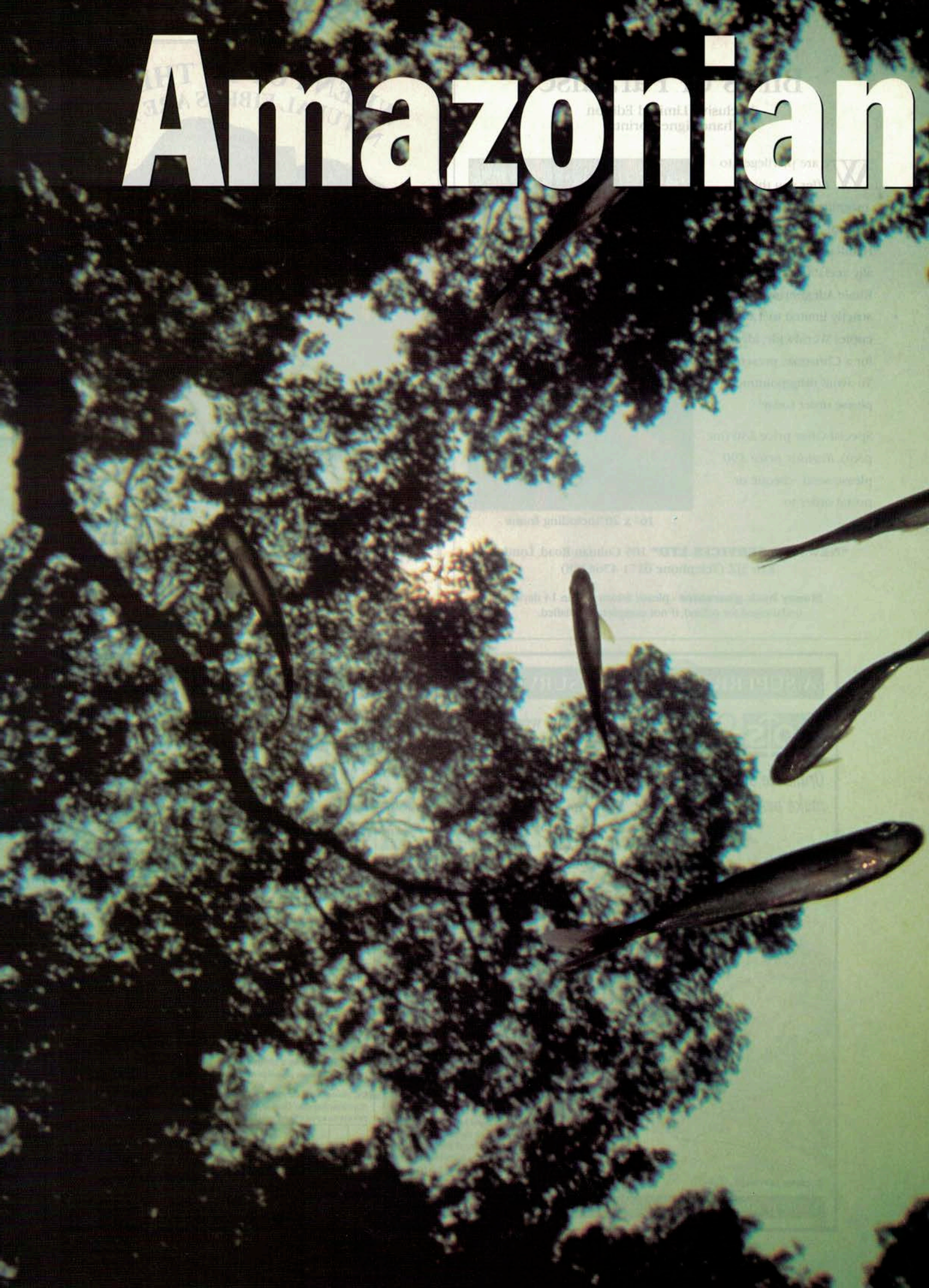


# Amazonian





# Atlantis

Amazon rainforests are dazzling enough when you walk through them. But how about when you can *swim* through them? For several months a year, vast areas become aqua-wonderlands, as *Michel Roggo* found out when he took the plunge.

Michel Roggo first spent 10 years perfecting his use of a remote-control camera under water. He read widely and spoke to biologists who'd worked in the Amazon. But "it was always extremely hard to find animals. There are about 20 million people living here, fishing and hunting, where once there were just 3 million Indians." Finding clear water was the other major obstacle. The waters of the Rio Negro are naturally black with organic matter, those of the Amazon itself, a coffee colour tinted with soil from the Andes. But the rivers flowing from the south were once relatively clear. "On the Rio Tabajos, where I worked a lot, there were about 3,000 miners working even the smallest streams, washing out the river banks to get the gold. Even rivers 20km wide are polluted now." It took him five trips, the last one seven months, and many weeks of travelling (*below*) to get a few images he was really happy with. ►

All photographs by Michel Roggo/Bios

## WHEN FISH FLY

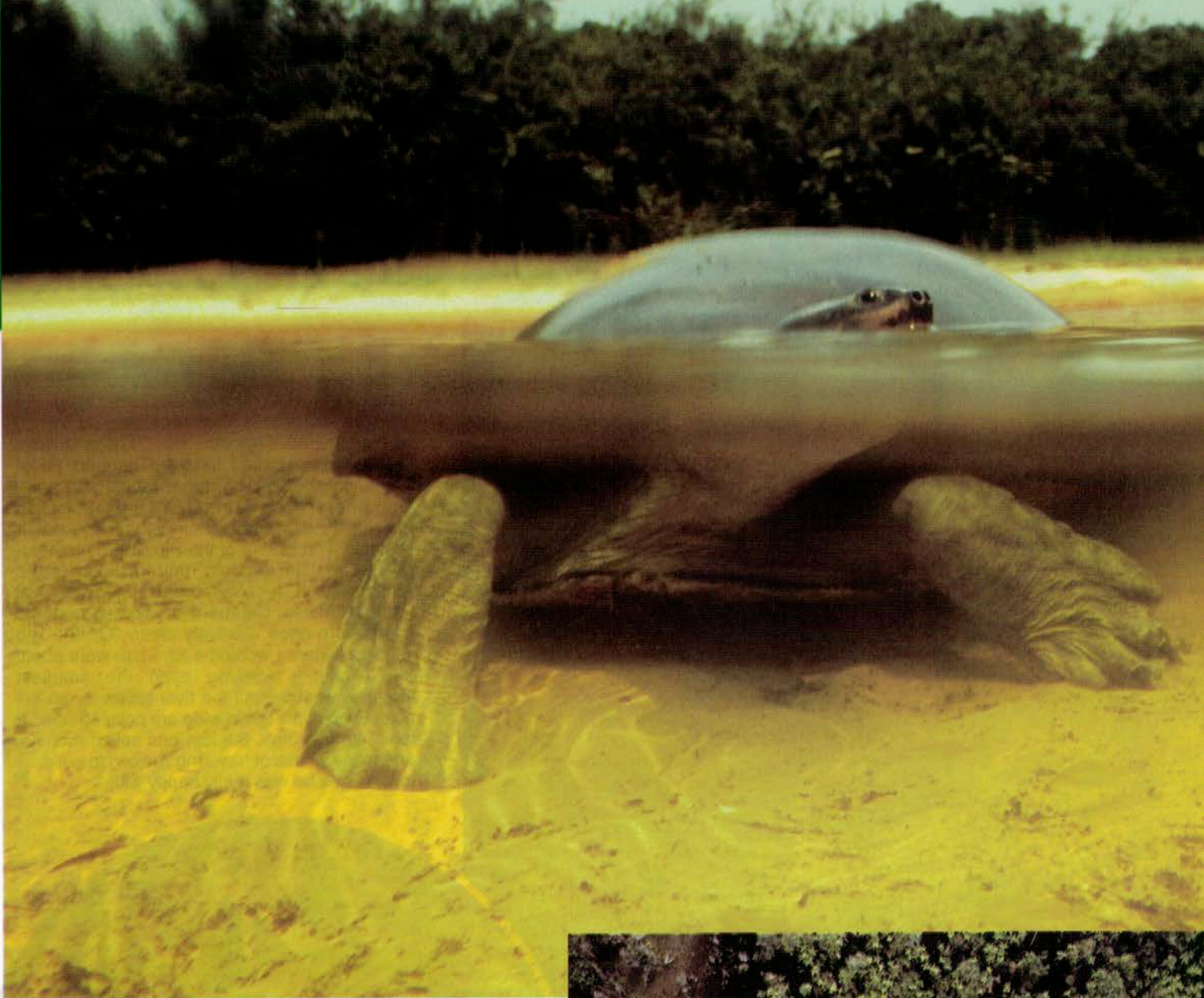
"This was the sort of picture I was looking for. Diving would have stirred up the water and frightened the fish, and so I set up my remote camera on the river bottom and sat nearby in a small boat watching on a tv screen. Here, on a tributary of the Rio Tabajos, I waited many days before a fish was kind enough to swim by."





# Amazon

Amazon rainforests are dazzling enough when you walk through them. But



## THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

"This metre-long South American river turtle was the only big one I ever saw. My two guides were also very happy to see it, but for another reason. Everyone here eats any turtles or eggs they can find, even though it's illegal, but as a special favour to me they didn't kill this one. The turtle had probably managed to survive to this size only because it was on the border with Bolivia, in the southern part of the Amazon, quite far from the next village. People don't like to come here because there are problems with cocaine smuggling, and sometimes with the army, and so it was a good spot to see animals."

## IN THE CLEAR

"From an ultralight plane – not something that is itself easy to find in the Amazon – I spotted this area, where a small creek runs into the Rio Tabajos. Here I finally found the clear water I needed for underwater images."





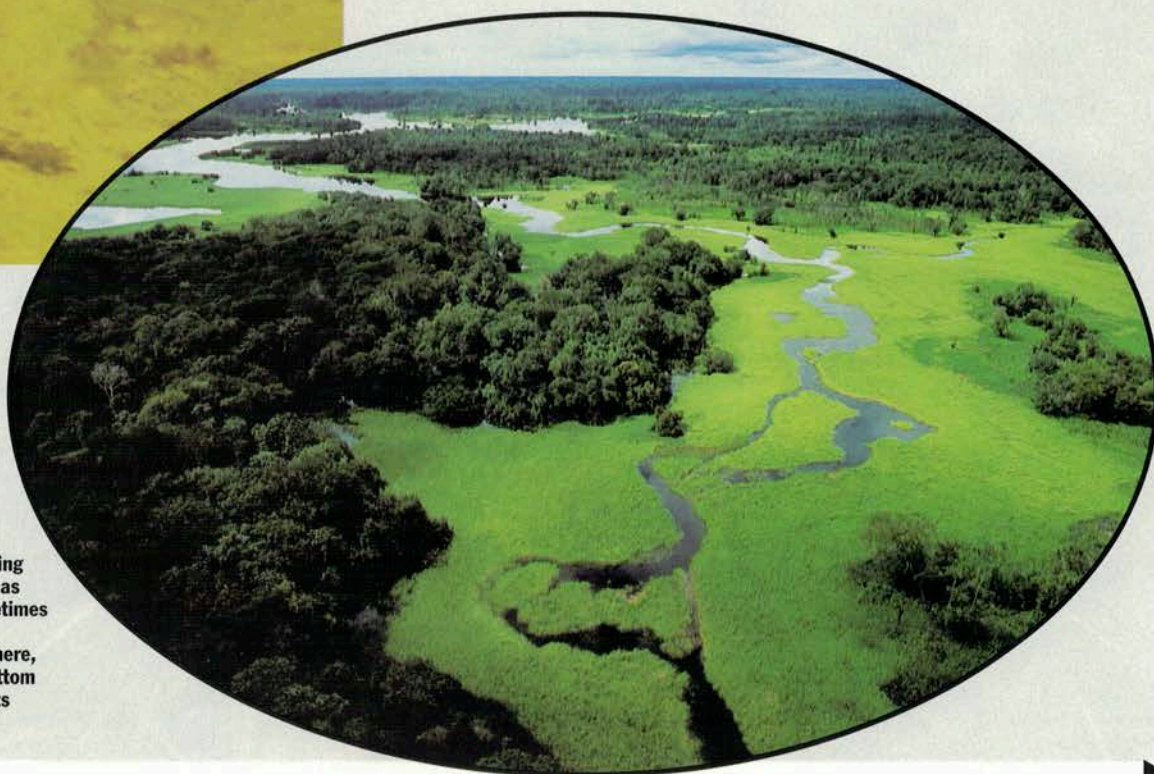


#### IN DEEP WATER

"From my research I had quite a good idea of how the forest might look under water and expected to be able to photograph 'normal' trees once I found clear conditions, but seeing these palm trees 10 metres under water was a bonus. How these or any other of the flooded forest's trees survive long periods of inundation remains largely a mystery to scientists. Ground-dwelling animals can, at least, keep their feet dry. When the water gets high, they climb the trees, and so there are sometimes quite a lot up there, particularly ants and snakes. In all, I spent seven weeks photographing in this area. And if you go with your boat into the forest and stay for many hours, you have to put a rope around a tree – and then, if you are not careful, you have the whole boat full of ants trying to escape their water-bound prison. I did try to work here at night, but you could see quite a lot of snakes around then, and it was not a good feeling."

#### FLAT OUT

"Here, between the Rio Negro and the Amazon, the river rises 10-15 metres every year and stays for up to five months. In the wet season, it is flooded forest that dominates, with the remaining area covered by lakes and 'floating meadows' – a luxuriant mix of plants such as grasses and lilies that grow upwards, sometimes up to 20cm a day, to keep ahead of the floods. It might seem that no one is living here, but there are people all around – in the bottom of the picture you can see where their boats have made a shortcut through the river."











#### **HUNTING AT HOME . . .**

The tucunaré fish (again in the clear-water creek running into the Rio Tabajos) is a voracious predator. A member of the cichlid family, it is more like a bass in body form, and is the only fish in Amazonian waters that operates as a pursuit-predator. Once it attacks, it does not give up but carries on the chase until it catches its prey. Of this there is no shortage, particularly in the wet season, when most floodplain fish spawn to make best use of the food and protection provided by the seasonal floating meadows.

#### **. . . AND AWAY**

Michel Roggo is not about to give up the chase, either. He is now back in Switzerland working to pay for yet another expensive photographic trip to the Amazon. Among the creatures still in his sights are some of the larger species of fish, such as "huge catfish that live on the bottom of the Rio Negro, well below sea level."

