

Nature Stock Photography - People in the Landscape

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Most photographers enjoy the peace, solitude and the personal exploration that comes with landscape and nature photography. It is all about the excitement of discovery. If you can shoot, sell lots of images and make a handsome living at it, then you are set. However, there are few nature photographers today who can shoot only what they want and have guaranteed sales that provide a living. Today's market is too speculative, uncertain and competitive. In reality, we never have enough sales and must continue the never-ending search for new markets to sell our images.

One way that nature photographers can increase their sales potential is to add people to their landscape images. This can be done several ways in what I refer to as 'participatory' and 'non-participatory' adventures. Participatory is when you as the photographer are participating in the activity, such as rock climbing. You are photographing as you rock climb. Non-participatory is photographing someone else's activity, such as a kayaker from the river bank.

Why do images with people sell? Because editors like images that give viewers a sense of place that they can identify with it. Photos sell magazines and the editors know what their readers are interested in. As an example, look at Backpacker Magazine. Each issue contains some beautiful landscape and nature images, but many more of 'people outdoors' who are backpacking, hiking, enjoying the wilderness, or some other activity set against a beautiful landscape.

Make an Adventure

Getting great outdoor images does not always require you to participate, hire models, or take an adventure vacation. Many nature photographers have created great-selling outdoor images by simply going on a day hike, visiting a park, a river, or other outdoor locations and placing a person in the scene. If you are heading for a waterfall, take a friend or spouse and shoot the waterfall followed by some 'people outdoors' images. A person standing at the base of a waterfall, hiking along a trail, pretending to be backpacking and other casual outdoor activities can be taken on the same outing to photograph the waterfall.

Take an Adventure

Another method for getting good nature, 'people in the landscape', and adventure photos is to go on an adventure that provides the opportunities. One example would be to take a trip with a group, such as rafting the Grand Canyon. There are incredible opportunities for stunning nature photography but also great outdoor and adventure images. There are waterfalls, the flowing water, side canyons and creeks, Native American ruins and desert wildlife. But there is also some of the best whitewater action as well as opportunities for capturing camp scenes, hiking shots and general 'people outdoors' photos.

How do you go about documenting an adventure like this? First, the people on the trip (most likely) are not models that you arranged to be on the trip, but are other paying passengers. To photograph them, you have to seek their permission in advance by letting them know you "want to document this great adventure we are all on." Ask if you can photograph them during the adventure. I tell the group before the trip starts that I will send everyone a booklet of my photos in exchange for signing a model release. Sure, that costs money, but I can make money off the released photos. If it is a small or short trip, I will send a print to everybody as a thank-you.

Strategy

You can approach your photography in many ways and should attempt to cover all the bases. First,

Note - thumbnails are links to larger images with captions.



setup and get the calendar image (horizontal) followed by the magazine cover (vertical, room for the header) and then the person in the scene. Certainly not all scenes you photograph will work with all three approaches, but if you consider all three every time you set up the camera, you have increased your sales potential accordingly. Start by getting a friend, spouse, or a fellow photographer to go out with you and have them available should you see the composition you need a person in. I have created successful images while traveling with fellow photographers and we'll agree to pose in each others images when we see the shot.



Also use the technique of *Isolate and Illustrate*. If for example you are joined on your hike to the waterfall by a friend and you see a great image of them hiking through the old growth forest, stop and set up your shot including them and all the big trees. This is *Illustrating* the photo by using a person as one part of the bigger picture of an old growth forest. If you next put on a 300mm lens and zoom in on the hiker so that they are the entire photo and the background is blurry, you have *Isolated* them in this photograph.



The goal here is to maximize your efforts by creating as many versions of every photo to increase options for your clients. The *Illustrated* image will sell to the client looking for a photo of someone hiking in an old growth forest. The *Isolated* image will sell to anyone looking for an image of a person hiking, yet the location is not identifiable. You may have taken the photo in California but sell it to accompany a story of hiking in North Carolina.

Participatory

Many of the most successful outdoor photographers often live the adventure. Much of the best rock climbing photography is done by climbers on the rocks, although not always. This is true for other adventures that require the photographer to be part of the action and often in an inaccessible location. If you are active in any particular sport, you can quickly get marketable material by becoming a specialist in that particular activity. By marketing yourself as the hang gliding or rock climbing photographer and showing excellent and creative images, you could soon find yourself widely published and recognized throughout the industry. There are also many participatory soft-adventures that you can do without being an extreme sport specialist including rafting, biking, hiking and backpacking, camping, fishing, and so on.

Apparel

If you plan to have another person join you on an outing with the intention of using them in your photos, you should consider the apparel they bring. With constantly changing trends and styles, apparel that is outdated will eliminate the salability of an image quickly. You can easily determine what your subject should wear by making a visit to the local outdoor clothing retailer and seeing what is on the racks. You can also check the outdoor magazines to determine what they are currently using. Then look through the clothing in your closet and your model's and find colors that resemble what you have seen in the store and magazines. The best way to have current images available to market is to keep shooting with current apparel.

Markets

For each of the categories of outdoor sports there is a specialty niche magazine representing that sport. Look at snowboarding, for example, there are probably a dozen magazines. In addition to the niche magazines, there are also general interest magazines such as *Outside*, *Men's Journal*, *National Geographic Adventure*, and many more that buy all sorts of adventure sports imagery on a seasonal basis. There are calendar, book, and travel publishers. If you are shooting at a local ski area, the local visitor and convention associations will buy photography of these sports to promote tourism. There is also the occasional advertising and corporate clients looking for conceptual photography to use in an ad, brochure or annual report. Many of these niche magazines buy their images from top photographers in their fields. If you want to break into the ski industry and shoot skiing you will need to spend time building a fantastic portfolio and a big file of outstanding ski imagery.

When looking for markets to sell your images, carefully look at these niche magazines and you will see that every one does not use only action photos from participatory photographers. There is plenty of room for the soft-adventure photographer who shoots casual recreational images in all these magazines. There are also many magazines that are about lifestyle and they use all sorts of casual outdoor imagery. Success will be determined by what you decide to shoot based on your interests and willingness to create.

National parks are high on my list of favorite destinations and may also be on your priority list of photo subjects. If you spend the time researching magazines and books you will again find that photos with people are used widely. Magazines such as *Backpacker*, *Outside*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Men's Journal*, and many more publish articles about the national parks every year. These articles often include scenics, but usually contain more scenics with people or a recreational image of an activity. Book

publisher KC Publications publishes the book series 'The Story in Pictures' of the national parks. Each book includes fabulous scenics of the park but also includes images with people in the park.

Text

Remember, you will never get a magazine cover if your compositions don't allow room for text. Continue to shoot good, tightly framed and well composed images, but also take images that leave room for copy. No matter what you hear about "filling the frame", you also need to compose images that are looser compositionally. Clients will often crop a picture to fit the layout exactly as they want it, but if the room isn't there it wont work and you have lost a sale. The clients then call the next photographer whom they believe has what they are looking for. It has happened before where a horizontal image has been cropped to a vertical and it's due to having an image loosely shot, and the room to crop it as needed.

No matter what your interest as a nature photographer is, you can increase your range of salable images by including people. If your passion is flowers you can create added value to an image by having a small child in the scene looking at the flowers. Having a person sitting on a rock with their companion dog next to them and the blurring waterfall behind will create an image suitable for a whole new market. If you are day hiking the alpine ridge amongst the summer flowers and snow capped peaks, have your companion with a daypack stop and observe the beauty before them while you shoot verticals and horizontals. These images, although cliché, continue to sell year after year. Then photograph the calendar scenic.

Wherever and whatever you may go shoot, consider the human element in relation to nature and the outdoors as a part of your photo agenda. Cover all the bases and you could greatly enhance your chance of capturing salable images and having the right shot when a client calls.

Comments on NPN nature stock photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#).

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Charlie Borland has been a professional photographer for over 25 years. Based in Oregon, he shoot both locally and nationally, traveling extensively for a wide range of clients, some of which include: *Xerox, NW Airlines, Fujitsu, Tektronix, Nike, Blue Cross, Nationsbank, Texas Instruments, Pacificorp, Cellular One, Early Winters, among others*. He has received numerous awards and recognition for his photography.

His outdoor, landscape, and adventure photography has been used extensively throughout the world in hundreds of calendars, advertising and marketing campaigns, and magazines including: *National Geographic Adventure and Traveler, Outside, Women's Sport and Fitness, Newsweek, TV Guide, CIO, Sports Illustrated for Women, Time, Backpacker, Sunset, American Photo, Outdoor Photographer, Eco Traveler and Southern Bell*, to name a few.

Charlie has been heavily involved in the stock photography business, owning a stock photo agency for 8 years before merging with Definitive/FPG and later Getty Images. He is currently Director of Photography at www.fogstock.com an online agency he co-founded.

He also directs [Aspen Photo Workshops](#) where he conducts numerous workshops including: Making Money in Stock Photography, Travel Stock Photography, and several Adventure Sports and Cowboy Photo Shoots for stock photographers.

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