

The International League of Conservation Photographers

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As anyone who has ever tried to get a living from outdoor photography will testify, stock photography sells in the freest of all free markets. There is nothing to bar you or anyone else at home or abroad from putting your images in front of a buyer and, if they fit the bill, securing a licensing fee. There are no import quotas or tariffs, no professional qualifications required or universally accepted quality standards to be adhered to. What's more, the Web has made every photographer with a searchable website a mini-multinational with a presence in every country with an internet hook up. What a business to get in to !

But let's look at this from the other side of the fence: how does a picture researcher working for a conservation organisation know where to source images from when there is so much choice and so many great deals to be had? Should she do the obvious thing - go to the big international agencies and do a one-stop Wal-Mart shop there ? Or should she instead seek out the small, specialist stores - individual photographers - who have fewer lines but offer a personal, informed service and often have obscure stock not carried by the bigger outlets. What should inform a researcher's buying habits and does it really matter where she buys from anyway? The answer to that depends to some extent on whether the researcher sees herself as merely an image consumer or recognises the mutual benefits of becoming a patron.

While all professional nature photographers share one thing in common - the need for money to buy food and more hard drive space - beyond that there is a clear divergence of motives emerging. The "commodity photographer" is primarily concerned with filling the shelves with popular lines that they and their agents know have sold in the past. The images are rarely challenging, usually generic and often contrived. But they look good on first viewing. In terms of satisfying a need, there is nothing inherently wrong with this product any more than there is in a bag of soy beans; it's just that you, the picture buyer, might not want the same fare every day or approve of how it was produced.

Another group of photographers also believes strongly in eating but for reasons of conscience, principle, self-delusion or outright market ignorance pursue agendas beyond simply the creation of attractive imagery because they believe that in some ill-defined way their work can make a difference. They may do some shelf-filling work too but it is their agenda and its pursuit that defines their identity as photographers (and which, coincidentally can sometimes lend them a commercial edge over the bean producer). The term "conservation photographer" has been coined to describe members of this group but I prefer the term, "photo-activist."

A key part of a photo researcher's job then should be not only to distinguish "good" from indifferent photography (and levels of visual illiteracy remain worryingly high!) but to seek out those photo-activists whose agendas broadly match her organisation's. Patronage benefits both parties: it provides funding to a photographer for "mission" work that may not have a broad commercial appeal and by having an input into its creation, an organisation can acquire unique, fresh imagery of the sort it couldn't find in international stock libraries. Moreover, building a relationship with one or a small group of photographers ensures that the pictures an organisation is using to promote its message meets the ethical standards it, sometimes wrongly, assumes all nature photographers adhere to. For example, an uncomfortable inconsistency arises when organisations that lobby for wilderness conservation use pictures of captive animals in their promotional material. Whether this happens as a result of ignorance on the part of the researcher or lack of candour on the part of the photographer, it can only undermine the organisation's message.

So, how are the researchers and photographers to find each other? The absence of any sort of meaningful accreditation for professional nature photographers hasn't made the job easier. Up until recently there hasn't been a body whose standing made its stamp of approval worth a damn. I believe that has now changed with the founding of the International League of Conservation Photographers at the World Wilderness Congress in Anchorage in fall 2005. Endorsed by The National Geographic Society, WWF, Conservation International and the Wild Foundation, the fellows of this new organisation include well-known individuals with a



proven track record of effective campaigning photography and include Robert Glenn Ketchum, Tui de Roy, Karl Amman, Patricio Robles Gil, Michael "Nick" Nichols, Staffan Widstrand, Xi Zhinong, Phil Borges and Connie Bransilver. ILCP co-founder, Cristina Mittermeier, commented at its inauguration, "The League will stand or fall by the standards we keep. We are all in this boat together; it has lots of holes and each of us has a finger in one. If one pulls, out, we all suffer." Rarely has a group of nature photographers demonstrated such a unity of purpose and had such influential backers. Affiliation to the ILCP may just be the best "quality" label a photographer can offer to picture buyers.

What quality means is not only the technical and aesthetic standards you would expect from an agency image but an assurance of "ethical cleanliness" and open access to the story behind the image. NGO's also know that in working with these photographers they are indirectly supporting their own work. It is ironic in view of the central role played by photography in campaigns and communication that it is the first area in which many organisations look to cut costs. Perhaps if the photographer - or let's be more specific: photo-activist - is viewed more as a partner rather than merely as another supplier, organisations will find they get more for their money than a bag of beans.

The ILCP is structured so that it isn't just a bunch of agenda-driven photographers swapping environmental horror stories with each other. Associates include end-users and scientists who recognise the value of "conservation photography" and the ILCP provides a unique forum for different parties to come to a clearer understanding of each others' needs. In the essay, [Why it's Good to Talk](#), I outlined the pressing need for improved dialogue and co-operation between nature photographers and scientists at a time of profound changes in the natural environment. Perhaps the ILCP's most crucial function then will be as a conduit through which photographers, conservationists, scientists and picture users can communicate and coordinate their needs and action. A growing number of photographers are showing a commitment to photographing the natural world as it is with a passion and a purpose - turning their back on shelf-filling. But it is a high risk - and ultimately futile - venture if purchasing decisions are uninformed by the bigger picture - and buyers take the easy way out. These photographers are the natural partners of organisations who care about the hue of their public image, be they corporate or charity. The decision of where to buy isn't really so hard after all.

Editor's note - Niall Benvie is a founding member of the ILCP. Visit their website at www.conservationphotography.net.

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Niall Benvie, who runs [Images from the Edge](#), is the UK's most prolific writer on natural history photography, publishing almost 70 articles and a book (amounting to over 135,000 words) between 2000-2002 alone. But the scope of his writing extends much wider into issues of land management and the polarisation of nature and culture as well as travelogues and commentaries on subjects as diverse as species re-establishment programmes and eco-tourism.

Several thousand pictures from The Images from the Edge collection are accessible in its [searchable online database](#).

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