

Environmental Photography: Blending Art & Activism

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In 1999 I had a life-changing experience. After twenty years of working construction and aggravating a back injury suffered shortly after I was out of high school, I had surgery for bulging disks. When it came time to go back to work my surgeon signed my work release form, looked at me and said, "you should realize that even though you can physically go back to work, you're a thirty-seven year old with a sixty-seven year old back." To put it mildly this made me stop and evaluate my life. I had visions of myself as a retired senior, stooped over from the waist clutching my cane and staring at my feet!

Not long after that, with my wife's support, I made the decision to jump into the freelance photography business full time. Knowing that I wouldn't initially make enough money to support the business, let alone put bread on the table, I also started working part time as a Forest Watch Coordinator for a local conservation group here in northwest Montana, documenting and commenting on activities in the forest that we felt were degrading the environment.

My job with the conservation group ended in 2002 when I decided to focus my energies solely on photography, yet that work has had a profound influence on the direction my business has taken. I now try to focus as much time on environmental issues as possible and have many conservation groups as clients. Stylistically my photography has evolved into more of a photo journalistic approach to image making.

Listed below are ten tips on environmental photography based on my experience over the past few years. If you are passionate about both photography and conservation issues, I hope these tips can help you focus on working as an environmental photographer or perhaps on a special project you care deeply about. As you will read, much of the work of an environmental photographer takes place away from the camera.

Work Locally

Consider for a moment that every landscape on this planet where we humans live has environmental issues that can be documented with a camera. With our exploding human population, issues involving the environment and our impact upon it will only grow with time. By working locally you can make the most efficient use of your time as well as have more passion for your work since it involves an area you have a vested interest in. Also consider joining a local conservation group and you may soon discover many friends who share your interests as well as add to your knowledge of the land and its issues.

For myself, I found that once I started working locally on environmental issues my skill as a photographer improved by leaps and bounds. By focusing on local issues you can become a go-to person for non-profit groups looking for images in your area. Just imagine what could be accomplished if every NPN member who is interested in environmental issues took it upon him or herself to work on a local project this upcoming year!

Networking

Environmental Photography can involve essentially everything that makes up a landscape. It is impossible for any one person to have all the knowledge necessary to identify important subjects that need to be photographed. In any region there are conservation groups, government agencies and individuals with resource knowledge who can help tremendously when working on an environmental photography project. In making contact with different groups and individuals you will find that people generally love to share their knowledge of a particular subject. Additionally, consider attending environmental meetings or seminars open to the public. You also may find that by simply picking up the telephone and talking to a government biologist or resource professional,



doors will open for your photography work.

Research

In order to consistently create compelling images of our environment, it is vital to spend time studying and researching the region you will be photographing before going out in the field. The Internet makes it possible to do most of the research you need right at home. I have several local, regional and national news sites bookmarked on my computer where I can quickly keep up with issues that may be of importance to me when working on photography.



Diversify

Environmental Photography is essentially story telling with a camera rather than with pen and paper. In order to tell a complete story it is crucial to be able to photograph a wide range of subjects. If you specialize in one aspect of nature photography, such as landscape or wildlife, look at it as a challenge to your craft to include areas outside your specialty. While it is important to have a wide range of lenses and equipment in order to generalize in photography, don't look at it as an impossible task if you don't have the finances for every piece of equipment. For instance, if you are a landscape photographer without large telephoto lenses, you can still focus on wildlife photography by including wildlife in their environment. In fact, with environmental photography I think it's preferable to show animals in their natural environment, rather than close-ups that show little or nothing of the habitat a particular animal lives in.

Every Picture Tells a Story

While it's impossible to have every image tell a story of the region I'm photographing, I try to make that my ultimate goal when working on environmental photography. This is where networking, researching and diversifying your photography all comes together. If you don't have a strong awareness and knowledge of the land and its issues, it's very likely that compelling images can be overlooked.

When out in the field look for images that can convey, either literally or symbolically, issues affecting the land. For example, the photo of the Grizzly bear tracks and mountain stream was taken in a remote area of Montana that has active oil and gas leases which haven't been developed yet. Two subjects that clearly impart the feeling of wilderness (and are threatened by oil and gas development) are grizzly bears and clear running streams.

There are also times when composing images that tell a story of the environment where it is necessary to go against common rules of composition that we have learned as photographers. For instance, wetlands and forests are two habitats that can be very chaotic and messy. It may be tempting to eliminate important elements in the quest for a simple artistic image—we've all been taught, "less is more." Yet in the process of simplifying, a photo showing the incredible diversity of a particular habitat can be lost. What I will often do in this kind of a situation is photograph a simple image, then sit down and let the more complex composition come to me as I soak up the scene. I try to work on what I call controlled chaos. Many times even in a chaotic environment it is possible to use a foreground center of interest, such as a colorful plant or interesting reflection in water, while still including all the elements that are important in telling a story.

Focus on the Positive

This is where most nature photographers can excel in environmental photography. Environmental organizations most commonly look for images of threatened landscapes or wildlife that illustrate the beauty of the subject while at the same time convey the sense of loss that could be caused by development of the land. When focusing on the positive consider what is the most opportune time to photograph. For instance, wetlands usually have the largest variety of wildlife during spring and fall months, while mountain landscapes with amazing wildflower blooms are at their most vibrant during the summer months.

Focus on the Negative

Most nature photographers are compelled to photograph the beautiful aspects of nature, yet if you are working as an environmental photographer it is also vital to illustrate the negative impacts on the landscape. When I first began photographing degraded environments I was disappointed with the results. I soon realized by looking at my slides that I was essentially taking snap shots without considering the rules of composition that can help create a compelling image.

The rules of composition normally used in nature photography can also be applied to photographing degraded environments. This

may include interesting foreground elements or leading lines to draw a viewer into a scene, angle of view, dramatic lighting, objects that give a sense of scale, etc. Consider this—all good photographs give an emotional response when viewed, whether happy or sad, joyous or angry. Your job when photographing degraded environments is to pass on the sense of loss you felt when standing there. If it's sediment runoff, use a wide-angle lens and get right down next to the water so the viewer can feel as if they are right there. If it's urban sprawl, use a telephoto lens to stack houses together in order to illustrate the loss of open space. Rather than using beautiful late evening light, look for dark stormy weather or heavy fog that can lend a somber, ominous feeling. Think of your work as a writer who is doing an opinion editorial; you want to be as persuasive as possible in making your point.

The Human Element

My early photography rarely included people since I was more interested in pristine landscapes without the imprint of man. Today, however, I often look to include the presence of man. Our interactions with the land—whether through recreation, research, or work—dictates how the land is used. Non-profit groups working on conserving the environment also love to show people using the land in a low-impact way.

Combining Images with Words

As you begin to compile a large file of images concerning the environment, you will soon find yourself in a position to inform the public about environmental issues. One way to publicize your work and the issues it involves is by having a photo essay package that can be used in environmental newsletters, newspapers or magazines. This may initially seem like a daunting and burdensome task—particularly if you get “writer's block” like myself! Yet I have found that if I've put the time in to learn all the issues surrounding my photography it is often easier to write since I have a strong knowledge and passion for the subject. Additionally, having a friend or relative help with editing and proof reading is a huge help. Another option to consider is partnering with a writer in your area who also has a good knowledge and passion for the subjects you're photographing.

Don't Sell Yourself Short

Okay, lets say you have worked for a year or more on environmental photography. You'll soon find that non-profit groups will come to value your images as a way to get the message out regarding their cause. If you have worked part time on a project you'll gain great satisfaction as I have in donating your work to local non-profits. If your work gains the attention of national organizations, however, take the time to learn how to negotiate being paid for your work. Your high quality photos have a monetary value and you should be paid for your work just as staff members of non-profits get paid. Particularly for site-specific work, rather than general images of wildlife for instance, I consider my work has financial value just as if I was working on staff; only in this case I'm freelancing. This does not mean I don't give something back; every year I donate time to present slide shows or donate prints for fundraisers for example. If you are unsure of how to price your work there are many resources available online to help you out, including the photo marketing forum on NPN.

In conclusion, using photography to benefit the environment can be satisfying on a personal level as well as an exciting challenge photographically. Obviously the steps I have outlined are not for everyone: you must be passionate first and foremost about the issues you are documenting since it entails much more than simply photographing your favorite landscapes or subjects. Yet if you're like me and have an interest in both environmental issues and photography I think you'll find that it is an exciting and challenging way to approach photography.

Editor's note - view more of randy's work in his online portfolio at members.photoportfolios.net/randybeacham.

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