

Nature Stock Photography: Breaking In

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Nature and the landscape photography is a wonderful endeavor that we all find to be a personally rewarding and satisfying pursuit. Fresh air, peacefulness, and the spectacular scenery displayed by nature provide so many opportunities. The search for great nature photos starts as a personal journey and comes from deep within each and every one of us. Unlike other areas of professional photography, there are no clients by your side, no models to coordinate, just oneself, a camera, and nature. Exploring, searching, and discovering is the process in which a great photograph is conceived. For many, a great photo they hope to sell!

Shooting, marketing, and eventually selling your work is a natural evolution for many landscape and nature photographers. What's better than to pay the bills with income from your photography? It helps keep you in the field longer. Making money from your images requires turning your passion into a business? This simple sounding step however, is actually a huge leap and some planning and preparation will make for a smoother transition.

Where do you fit within the market?

Nature photography is extremely competitive. Being a good photographer is not enough to guarantee success. You have to be an incredible photographer with good images, a good marketing plan, and a great business sense. The first place to start building your business is to determine what your product is and where it fits into the market. Like all businesses, your image files are a product line that you must sell to your clients in order to have a successful business. To get started you must ask yourself: What do I love to shoot? Who buys what I love to shoot? How will I sell them what I love to shoot?

Once you have answered those questions, you will have a better understanding of the necessary steps to get your business going. The next step would be deciding how to build your product line. Is your plan to be a local or regional photographer, specializing in the area near your base? If so, building your product line would include photographing the countryside, the city skylines, historic sites, waterways, natural areas, parks, and any other locations that make your region notable.

If your goal is to market a photographic product line that is more national or even international, then you must follow the same steps and begin building your product line with an extensive file of images. Your subjects could be the National Park system, all states and provinces including the local and regional parks, wilderness areas, any and all waterways, forests, and tourist destinations.

This ambitious goal requires a substantial investment in time and money to travel and photograph these destinations. To compete with the more established photographers in this arena, you would need to make this a full time venture and it could take many years. Can you afford the time and expense?

What makes a good stock photo?

There are many reasons why an image becomes a good stock photo. A photograph is only a *good stock photo* if a client is willing to offer you compensation for the use of that photo. Until then it is just another pretty picture. Good stock photos can often be described as 'Subjects that are timeless and have long lasting appeal!' These might be generic images such as a spectacular moment in nature like lightning, a moody scene shrouded in fog, an incredible sunset and cloud formation, or as simple as a well composed image that allows room for text in a page layout. A stock photo that is site specific, such as Delicate Arch in Arches NP, Utah, must be absolutely spectacular to be a good stock photo these days. That arch has been



photographed thousands of times and images of it can be obtained for free on the web. Your Delicate Arch image needs to be a one-of-a-kind to become a good selling stock image. This thought applies to all photographs from the best known sites as they probably have all been heavily photographed.

Stock Photography Concepts

Successful stock photos are often successful because they illustrate a concept. It is not uncommon for a client to be looking for a stock image that conveys a specific concept. Some popular sample concepts include: Teamwork, Success, Competition, Family, Happiness, Pride, Performance, Quality, Reliability, Trust, Work, etc. Nature and landscape photographers often overlook this aspect, thinking that it only applies to stock photographers shooting lifestyle and business themes. Our photo agency licensed an image years ago for the cover of an annual report. The image was a grove of Giant Sequoia trees photographed from ground level, a wide angle shot looking up at a Sequoia seedling, about 6" tall, busting out of the dirt and surrounded by century old monarchs behind. The title for the annual report was Growth in 19XX (whatever year it was). Now that is a nature shot that screams concept! There are many ways to apply concepts to nature photographs. A single leaf on a dry creek bed of cracked mud could say: solitude. An eagle perched on a tree could fit the concept of Vision. A large corporation might use this photo in an annual report under the theme of Corporate Vision. A beautiful waterfall could have multiple concepts applied; Goals, Success, or Excellence. An adult prairie dog standing tall next to its den with its babies behind says Family. A spider web with dew on it and golden sunrise light could be used as World Wide Web. All these concepts are used regularly and are popular concepts for business communications.



Long Term Strategy

Stock photography is a long term process that will require time, energy and money to sustain. Besides creating your photographic product line, you need to continue to research your markets and determine what they are buying, what style of imagery they are buying, and where they are buying it. You do this by continually looking at your target markets' products. This could be calendars, gift and note cards, magazines, book publishers, religious publishing houses, and niche publishers, among others. Look at what they are buying. Some calendar companies produce a wide range of calendar titles while others create specialty calendars, like cats, or national parks.

One way to keep your research at hand is to start an idea file, a box or file cabinet with file folders labeled for different subjects or destinations such as: Alaska, California, Florida, etc. As you search magazines, brochures, or any printed material, clip out the pictures that get your attention and file them in your idea file for future reference. My idea files contain categories of all subjects with sub folders. In these folders are clippings from magazines, ads, brochures, and a collection of restaurant napkins, scraps of paper, or anything I could write on when the idea hit me. I continue to read the outdoor and travel publications and I tear out all the small articles on destinations and I place them in my idea file by state. Next time I travel to Texas, I will look in my idea file for places to photograph that I would not have remembered if I hadn't looked through my file.

Start Shooting

If you are beginning to build your files, work locally. Shoot the parks, rivers, botanical gardens, waterfalls, mountains, skylines, historic sites, parks, anything close to home. There are many fabulous and well published photographers who don't leave their own neighborhood and become well known as the source for great nature photography in their local area. There are local postcards, calendars, tourist brochures, Chamber directories, restaurant menus, advertising and design agencies, and many more potential markets for your local imagery.

Clients and Your Business

The most important point here is; who is your client? You might not be able to answer that since you may not know who your clients are or will be. Despite this uncertainty, you must start shooting for these clients immediately. Stock photography as a business is not about shooting for yourself anymore, it's about shooting for your clients. Be prepared to spend years building an image file.

Remember that you started shooting for passion and the cost of building an image file, is huge. Like all hobbies, photography costs a lot of money. By the time you are selling your images regularly, you should be afraid to look at the investment you made building that file. As you divide those costs of building the file by the revenues, it will equate to something ridiculous, an hourly rate probably measures in cents rather than dollars.

Finally...

Landscape and nature stock photography is driven by a passion where you cannot measure success solely on financial investment vs. future revenues. It takes years to build your business, a business driven by your passion for photography. As long as you keep the passion, you will be successful with a clear plan. And remember, professional landscape and nature photography is a lifestyle, not a job!

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 is an instructor for online photo school www.betterphoto.com and is the Director of [Aspen Photo Workshops](#) where he teaches the Digital Landscape and Stock Photography courses in addition to leading Photo Expeditions.

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