

Why It's Good to Talk

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In autumn 2001, the reaction to a two part article I first published in Outdoor Photography magazine confirmed my suspicion that there exists within the nature photography community - and further afield - surprisingly divergent views about its purpose. The complete piece, [The State of the Art](#), subsequently appeared in PhotoLife Canada, on this website and was also picked up by the forum of contemporary ideas, www.OpenDemocracy.net. More recently, it formed part of the teaching materials for the late Galen Rowell's Mountain Light photo workshops and will act as a discussion document at the inaugural meeting of the International League of Conservation Photographers later this year in Anchorage, Alaska (www.8wwc.org/program/conservation_photography.htm).

Gratifying though it is to have these musings widely circulated it is even more encouraging to discover that there is an appetite for fresh ideas from an emerging cadre of photographers actively concerned about environmental issues. In The State of the Art I argued that the Edenic world view manifest in so much contemporary nature photography was doing nothing to increase our chances of contributing to the debate on how best to balance the needs of wild nature and culture. Biologists and land managers looking at our pictures may be entertained by them but will certainly diagnose that we are in denial about the real state of the Earth. We are not seen as credible witnesses. The state of the Earth is itself a matter of increasingly vitriolic debate muddled by political, corporate and scientific agendas. But one thing is clear: for whatever reason, species loss, according to E O Wilson in "The Future of Life", "is catastrophically high, somewhere between one thousand and ten



thousand times the rate before human beings began to exert a significant pressure on the environment." The world is becoming a more uniform, homogenous place, in respect of both cultural and biological diversity. That this is a bad thing may be more than merely a value judgement: in nature, homogeneity leads inexorably to extinction of one sort or other as wild, random, spontaneous elements - the agents of adaptive change and survival - are eliminated. If you accept then that the demonstrable loss of diversity is a bad thing, that short term financial gain and employment (which are often implicated) are not actually good enough reasons for causing permanent extinction, is there anything that photographers can do about it? Or, like most of us with small children, are you just struggling to get through the week until you can escape with your camera at the weekend? Well, as we will see later, recreational photography may yet be a useful tool for environmental advocacy.

That there is not more direct collaboration between nature photographers and biological scientists is not surprising given the latter's suspicions of the former's subjective tendencies and preference for the picturesque. The antagonism between the Art and Science camps is nothing new. Both, however, lose out. The trouble with photographers is that too often we can pick out a beautiful melody but don't have a clue about constructing the harmony. Our pictures lack context, have no meaning beyond appearance. American photographer Daniel Dancer has harshly, though perceptively, characterised the objectified, sumptuously-lit portraiture that fills so many nature calendars and books as eco-porn. This type of idealised imagery is imbued with a sense that nature is there simply for us to enjoy and that we are excused any moral obligations towards it other than "saving it" for our continued amusement. Scientists can provide the harmony to the photographic melody, in the process finding a voice for the communication of their ideas and concerns.

One model of collaboration can be seen in the Symbiosis arrangement at ImagesfromtheEdge.com. There, over 3000 web-resolution images are available in a searchable on-line database for scientists, academics, students and some NGO's to use in web-published papers or PowerPoint presentations, free of charge. Users benefit by gaining unlimited access to professional imagery to enhance their presentations while the search rankings for ImagesfromtheEdge.com improve as links to the site are made in picture credits. As far as I am concerned this is a non-commercial use and I gain benefits in fostering partnerships with scientists. Through the registration form, I can find out who is working on what at an early stage and better anticipate later demand from commercial clients if and when research finds its way into the popular press.

While there remain well-founded doubts about the ability of photography to act as a direct agent of change (corporations and

governments show little susceptibility to seductive nature photos), there are a couple of contemporary examples which give cause for hope. The Swiss photographer, Karl Amman, has been largely responsible for drawing world attention to the bushmeat trade in central Africa through a combination of powerful, often shocking, pictures and persistent lobbying of individuals and organisations who may bring influence to bear. More recently, work by Subhankar Banerjee, which portrayed the north slope of Alaska not as Secretary Norton's "flat white nothingness" but as a vibrant and beautiful place, inadvertently provoked a political storm when Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer used his pictures to support her case in Congress against oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The subsequent relegation of his exhibit from the Smithsonian's most prestigious space to a basement was widely reported as a response to pro-oil political pressure on the Institute's trustees.

At this point, a clear distinction should be drawn between photography which aspires only to generate warm public feelings towards a cause or idea through untargeted dissemination and that which is aimed squarely at the decision makers and people in positions of power (PIPOP). In the cases of Amman and Banerjee it was not only "improved public awareness" that got things moving but also putting the images directly in front of the PIPOP. And in the democratic arena, it is the accessibility of these people through their websites and e-mail addresses that allows every photographer who cares about the natural world - recreational or working - to act as lobbyist.

The concept of photo-lobbying is simple, its message delivered directly. Let's assume that you have a digital camera and internet access. Document those natural places and things in your area that enrich your life, that you would feel disappointed to see disappear - or whose destruction has angered you. We're not talking about wilderness here, just the ordinary places where most of us actually engage with nature on a daily basis. Then e-mail these images on a regular basis to your elected representatives. Once you've set up a mailing list it is easy and quick to repeat with fresh images. The message that accompanies the pictures is short and to the point:

- This matters to me,
- You are my elected representative,
- What are you going to do about it?

A visual statement is inherently more powerful - and quicker to prepare and assimilate - than a written one. Central to the philosophy of photo-lobbying is the construction in the recipient's mind of the natural fabric of their constituency and what matters to a vocal, networked sector of their electorate. The photography need not necessarily be issued. Photo lobbyist are effectively advertising agents for nature in their area, with incessant repetition being the key to getting the message heard. Lazy (or overwhelmed) PIPOP can either delete or forward the e-mails to someone higher up the political food-chain to deal with. But the flow will keep coming. Indeed, sometimes politicians will find that they can advance their own prospects by championing a cause; in Germany, the lynx re-introduction programme in the Harz Mountains was accelerated by a local politician who saw it as an opportunity to progress her career.

This response to environmental degradation - or a wish to prevent it - need not be incompatible with the desire most of us have to make beautiful pictures, to hum the melody. Indeed, "Trojan Horsing", where beguiling, attractive photos are used to lead the reader - unexpectedly - into some harder facts and concerns is a more effective strategy than a direct assault on the battlements with brutish imagery.

Photo lobbying can work on a local level because residence lends authority and election obliges a response. No response, no vote. For photographers interested in putting their images in front of PIPOP at a national or international level, co-operation with scientists and NGO's, of engaging in photo-activism, seems a more certain way ahead than working independently. Nevertheless, a degree of autonomy is vital. The field of species reintroduction provides a useful and relevant model, highlighting as it does the constitutional shortcomings of large NGO's - let alone statutory bodies - which sometimes prevents them from acting as effective partners. Typically those reintroductions that work best are managed by a small team of dedicated individuals who share a common vision

You don't need to have an on-line library to share your pictures with non-commercial users - www.ARKive.org holds a vast collection of still and moving imagery of wildlife from around the world, available free of charge to anyone for personal and educational use (although with more restrictions than the much smaller ImagesfromtheEdge. com collection). ARKive Director Richard Edwards comments, "Arkive is now working with many hundreds of photographers from all around the world as we believe their images provide a crucial insight into our natural environment, and are influential elements in helping to raise public awareness. We welcome contact from photographers who share our passion for the natural world and would like to join us in promoting the urgent need to conserve it."

[Photo-lobbying](#)

This is about making the decision makers aware of what you value in your environment. But don't be a pain; keep the picture size fairly small (500 pixels along the long axis is adequate) to speed up download times and edit your pictures rigorously. Bad photos just give a bad impression. Don't attach any more than a couple of images per e-mail. Working with like-minded people in your area for a co-ordinated effort is sensible but mail your pictures in an individual capacity; votes are held by individuals, not groups. Do not invoke the name of any organisation without its express permission. And remember, as in advertising, persistence and repetition are crucial.

and subjugate personal differences in the pursuit of that vision. They are adaptable, open to new ideas and media savvy. They will have a charismatic leader and are networked with the right PIPOP; it is vital to be seen to be operating within statute. Were photographers to adopt a similar co-operative, project-led strategy, we might find it possible to achieve more than within formally structured organisations such as NANPA.

Effective though project-led groups can be, there is no doubt that operating under a more widely recognised umbrella organisation can be beneficial, if its structures are flexible enough. Meeting these sometimes conflicting objectives will be the challenge for the International League of Conservation Photographers, whose inaugural symposium will be held this autumn during the 8th World Wilderness Congress in Anchorage, Alaska. The League's co-founder, Cristina Mittermeier, comments, "Conservation-minded photographers from all over the world will assemble, along with scientists, policy-makers, government officials, lawyers, writers, indigenous leaders and others to participate in global conservation discussions." Significantly, this is the first time that nature photographers have been offered a seat at an international conservation forum - recognition perhaps that, "...images are an indispensable element of the conservation toolbox." Mittermeier sums up the League's objectives thus, "Photographers of great conviction, such as the late Peter Dombrovskis, have already traced the path for us and it is our job to show the way to the legions of new photographers who are not yet part of the conservation movement." Whether as grass-roots photo-lobbyists or full-blown photo-activists, now is the time to show ourselves as something more than just consumers of scenery and wildlife encounters.



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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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