

The Stock Agent: Should You Seek One? (Part 2)

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Now that you have made the decision to seek agency representation, what's the next step? The stories continue to circulate that the mega agents no longer want nature stock photography. This may be true with some agencies but not all. I asked President and CEO, Marv Johnson, of Fogstock.com, his feelings about agencies and representing nature photographers:

1. How do you feel about the markets for nature photographers?

The demand is strong for nature photography. Travel publications, web sites, PowerPoint users, retail image sellers and many other image users will eventually license nature imagery to illustrate a destination, serve as a background, or provide general inspiration. There is so much new media being produced and so much photography being used that demand looks to be healthy for years to come. However, in the area of nature photography, supply is abundant, and might be reaching the saturation point.

For example, a keyword search for the word "Nature" at Getty Images (the leading image provider in the world) returns 94,198 images. A search using landscape returns a paltry 41,333 images. Making it a bit broader and using the keyword outdoors provides 682,529 unique images. So the instant accessibility of good nature photography via stock agencies, image portals and other sources is rampant. Perhaps the biggest complaint from an image buyer is the burden of too much to choose from. Who really has the time and wherewithal to look through so many thousands of images?

Another issue contributing to the saturation of the market is the long lifespan of nature images. What was a good image 20 or even 50 years ago may very well still be good. There are no hairstyles to become obsolete or social trends to follow.

2. What do you look for in a nature photographer?

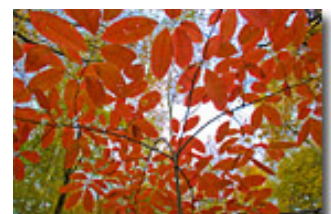
When I look at the work of a nature shooter, I ask myself, "Is this something that only this photographer could have made?" Is a personal vision present? A personal vision doesn't have to be cutting edge creativity, new uses of technology, or a copy of stylish new trends. It has to be a commitment, though. It could be the simple discipline of shooting only under the very best lighting conditions, or the mastery of full-range black and white printing. It could be something very unique, such as the narrative realism of a successful shooter like Nadav Kander. In his case, the stark loneliness of desert serves not only as something beautiful, but as a context for other messages.

Commitment such as that takes the form of an intention to do something that is specific, and draws a line between capturing and making an image. Most of all it, requires forethought, attention to detail, and follow-through.

3. What qualifications or type of work most interest you in nature photographers, and might lead to representation at your agency?

Beyond the presence of a personal vision, I look to the practical. Does this photographer produce the right combination of quality and quantity? The question of quantity will help me further explore the photographer's commitment to the process. There are thousands of photographers with a few very good images, but only a few photographers with thousands (or at least hundreds) of good photographs. Quantity will make stock photography worth the photographer's time.

I also look for diversity. For example, if I see a picture of the Arches National Park in Utah, I also want to know if the whole theme



can be expanded to include some outdoor lifestyle, or something graphic. It nearly always helps to have people in the photograph.

The human element in nature helps tell a story in a way that is absolutely essential for stock photography. When the human element is present, a landscape becomes a story, and the story can be translated into hundreds of different pitches and concepts by art directors, graphic designers, and publishers.

Also, photographers should look beyond the beautiful and the inspirational. Nature is a lot of things, including death, violence and destruction. It is even unattractive at times. It is also sometimes quite normal, everyday, banal, and utilitarian. All of these attributes can be explored and used to create an idea, concept, or feeling of interest to a customer.

So if I have to break it down and decide which nature shooter to represent, I look for: good photography skills, attention to light, commitment and dedication to a comprehensive body of work, and a sense of mission or purpose.

4. What would you advise a nature photographer to go shoot?

Start with an idea or something that a shooter really wants to make a picture of. Then use imagination and try to think of everything that can relate to that idea. Explore the human element, the lifestyle that surrounds it, and the details that may be overlooked, but which often communicate strongly. Then go and experiment and be open to the opportunities that will reveal themselves. From the perspective of an editor or art director, a flat tire on a car in Death Valley might make a much more interesting story than a beautiful expanse of the valley floor.

So what's the next step?

First, where do you look for agents and which agents are you planning to approach? There are several places you can start looking. Do you subscribe to any magazines that are related to the subjects in your photo files? I consider garden photography one aspect of nature photography and if this is what you shoot, you probably subscribe to garden magazines. If it is wildlife and insects you should be subscribing to these magazines to see what is being published, what the magazine is buying, and how the images are shot. These are the markets that you will want your images published in! As you research these magazines, are any showing a publishing credit that mentions the agency name in it? If so, then these are agents you should begin to take a serious look at.

Now you must familiarize yourself with the agencies that are out there and you can do this through internet searches or by looking at the Picture Agency Council of America, www.stockindustry.org/memberlist.html. This is the trade organization for the stock photo industry and any agency that is a member is known to be reputable. In fact I would not sign with an agency that was not a member and most of the major agencies are. Once you find some agencies and plan to contact them, visit their websites for their photographer guidelines.

Next, try and determine who else they represent in your specialized area. If you find a medium sized agency in California for example and see they represent David Muench, Tom Till, John Fielder, and a few other top guys in the business, is this the best place to start? This is called "file competition." How many others shoot what you shoot and will you be competing within the agencies files with these guys to make a sale?

Another consideration with agencies today is they are going totally digital in regards to photographers submitting their work. Maintaining an archive of millions of slides is very expensive and as the cost of doing business in the crowded field increases these agencies must look for ways to cut overhead. If you are still a film shooter, you should be prepared to have in place a scanning system of the highest quality to scan all your slides, retouch, color correct, interpolate, and deliver digitally to the agent. It may make sense to jump to high quality digital sooner than later.

Once you find some sites of interest go to their website and open their photographer's area and read about their policies and submission guidelines. Here is the link to Fogstock's photographer area as an example: www.fogstock.com/pages/photo_intro_letter.html. If they do not have a website, then continue looking since online sales are where the business is today.

Commissions

The rate of commission you receive from each sale is an important consideration in which agency you choose. In the beginning it was a 50-50 split, each party received 50%, but those days are over for the most part. Today it ranges from 7% to 40% on average with a few paying 65%. Since you are in the business to make money, carefully look at this. The agencies explain that they just can't market and promote their photographers work with anything more than the commissions they give. I personally feel that this

has much more to do with supply and demand. There are so many photographers out there doing stock that these agencies can say they pay 20% commission and still have no problem finding photographers to join them. I was with two agencies at the same time a few years back; one paid 50% and the other 20% and both were profitable. So look at who will accept you for representation and observe what their commission rate is as well before deciding to sign up.

Contracts

Before you join an agency be sure and read their photographers contract. This contract will tie you to this agency for a certain number of years. When I joined my first agency the average contract was three years but most now are five years. There are many reasons that agencies want to extend the years, but one of the primary reasons is their investment in marketing your work. As the industry becomes more competitive, the effort required by agencies to market imagery increases. Their concern is that three years is no longer enough time to market your work and get their return on investment. Almost all these contracts are self renewing at the end of their term, so if you wish to drop an agent you should keep track of the date the contract expires.

Agency contracts come with usually one of three different terms of exclusivity:

1. Non-exclusive. This means that you can create images and send the same images to all the agencies that represent your work. This used to be a very common contract stipulation when agencies were regional, but with the advent of the internet, all agencies now can supply images to the world. You can also sell the same work yourself.
2. Image exclusive. This contract term means any image that you supply to Agent 1 cannot be sent to any other agents and they have exclusive rights to market that series of images. You can usually sell the same images yourself.
3. Total Exclusive. This is the strictest of all contract terms in that the agent has exclusive rights to market the images and you do not have rights to sell them yourself.

Depending on the agents you choose to go with will determine the type of contract you will be asked to sign. The trend as I mentioned is to be more strict with the photographer than not. I understand why agents no longer want non-exclusive because the playing field is now level with the internet. But I need to be able to sell my pictures myself to the clients whom will never go to the net such as calendars or the local designer down the street. So I would go with an image exclusive contract that allows me to sell my images locally as well.

Micro Agencies

Micro agencies are a new trend and are very popular for those just starting out. These agencies will take anybody with half decent pictures and this is good and bad. Good because anybody that wants in can get in, bad because no pro shooter in their right mind would join one. They do not generate enough income!

The micro agencies I looked at pay 20 cents for a \$1 sale. I use the following situation as an example. You took a trip to the Galapagos and shot everything and it is beautiful work ready to sell. You spent close to \$6000 to get there and get those great shots. Since you are working as a pro nature photographer you need to sell your work for legitimate usage fees to make the trip profitable. As you edit the work, you find about 100 images from 3000 that are definite sellers and your intention is to place them with an agent. Since each of these "sellers"; cost about \$600 each to produce (assuming you will only sell the 100) then one or two traditional sales will cover the cost to produce each image. However, divide \$600 by 20 cents, and it now takes 3000 sales to cover the cost for EACH image

These micro agencies claim their photographers earn much more than traditional stock photographers, but I have not met one yet. I also, in 30 years of shooting stock, have never had an image used 3000 times. These agencies are designed to appeal to people who want to make money off their work no matter what the return because they feel successful as a photographer and theirs is not a business but rather a hobby. But for the working nature photographer, the return is just not there.

In an article in the November 2006 Photo District News issue on stock photography, the CEO of Shutterstock was quoted in the article as saying that Shutterstock had two photographers who made \$3500 a month. That's it?

Remember, your work has value and your image is worth fair market rates. Images still sell for hundreds and even thousands on occasion at traditional pricing, just not as often as before. That reduction in traditional sales has been made up by many more \$149.00 sales where you get \$50.00 to \$75.00, much better than 20 cents. If professional stock becomes your business, it will be a lot harder to buy a new \$1200 lens, put a kid through college, or make a house payment when you are paying for it with 20 cent sales commissions.

All these are important considerations in seeking an agent for representation. Next month I'll discuss making contact and submitting.

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

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.

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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