

Working With Non-Profits

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I believe that as a nature photographer, I am obligated to use my photography as a tool to promote the protection and conservation of our natural world. One of the best ways of doing this is by working closely with non-profit organizations. Developing a relationship with a non-profit can benefit your career, the organization's goals and campaigns, and most importantly, the environment. Historically, photography has been a major player in conservation since the very concept was developed.

A Reality Check

We all dream of traveling the world photographing vanishing species and remote wilderness for international organizations like the World Wildlife Fund or The Nature Conservancy. In reality, however, these dream assignments are extremely rare and are only given to well-established professionals who have been working with such organizations for many years.

We need to think locally when considering which non-profits to contact for photography work. Don't expect to have money thrown at you. In fact, don't expect any money at all. Local and grassroots non-profits have little or no money and are usually on a shoestring budget. Even local chapters of national organizations have very little money, particularly for photographers. If the non-profit organization generates millions of dollars in revenue each year, the majority of those funds go directly to advertising, lobbying and lawsuits. Despite the fact that you will probably never receive any money directly from a non-profit, it is still worth the time and energy to develop a relationship with one.

Choosing a Non-Profit

If you are serious about environmental and conservation photography, then you should develop a personal photography project. Choose an area or a species that is in need of protection and begin a long-term photography project in that chosen field. Begin researching those non-profits that work in that area and share similar beliefs. This is generally how I work, but there is another way to approach a non-profit as well.

Research local non-profit groups and choose one that is working on a campaign that is of interest of you. Look for a well established, respected non-profit that is in need of good photography and doesn't currently have an ongoing relationship with a photographer. Spend a few months or more working on one of their campaigns and when you feel you have a selection of quality images, approach them with your work. Many photographers have had great success with this approach and have developed successful long term relationships with their chosen non-profits.

Don't Give Your Images Away!

The fact that most non-profits have no money for photography doesn't mean you have to give them your images without any form of compensation. It's fine to donate a print or two for an annual auction or fundraiser (make sure you get a receipt so you can write it off) but don't make a habit of giving your work away. Most non-profits would love to be given your work and use it for absolutely everything, whether you like it or not. It is important to establish a contract with them to enforce rules for how they can and can't use your images. Here are some guidelines to start out with:

1. The non-profit must inform you when they are going to use any of your images and you must always get credit for the image. Many non-profits have newsletters and websites that hundreds and even thousands of people view each month. Having your images plastered on all over them is excellent free advertising, as long as you get credit for the image. Make sure they establish a web link from their site to yours so people can contact you.



2. You should be compensated if the non-profit is going to use your images for a money-generating promotional piece. For example, if your organization wants to print a calendar of your images that they are going to sell, you deserve to be compensated. If it is a high-quality calendar that will be distributed nationwide and the organization doesn't want to pay you, then work out a deal where you get copies for your own promotions to sell on your own. If they balk at that, then they don't respect your work and you should walk away.
3. You should keep all rights to your photographs.

Using Their Non-Profit Status

The most beneficial reason for working with a non-profit is to take advantage of their non-profit status. Most businesses, foundations, and grant givers won't give you a penny in funding for your project unless you are affiliated with a non-profit. This affiliation shows that your idea has credible backing and that you will use the money for the project as intended.

Most foundations and businesses must give funds and donations directly to a non-profit in order to receive any tax benefits. This means that you must have a contract set ahead of time that allows the non-profit to accept the money and then transfer it to you. Normally the non-profit takes a small percentage of the donated funds to cover their administration costs.

The Blue Earth Alliance is a non-profit that allows photographers to acquire funds for their photography projects. You need to fill out an application and have an established conservation or humanitarian project in order to be considered for the Blue Earth Alliance. Visit www.blueearth.org for more information.

Building a Long-Term Relationship

You should not approach a non-profit unless you're willing to stick it out for the long haul. The business of conservation is a slow process and you should expect to work on a project for many years. As your relationship with the non-profit grows, they will put more confidence in you and your work and your name will become associated with the organization. Over time, the non-profit might become receptive to more adventurous ideas such as co-publishing a book or funding a photography trip.

In this day and age, we cannot afford not to make conservation a priority in our work. The fate of many wild areas and creatures will be determined over the next ten to twenty years. As nature photographers, we have the ability to tell the story of these places and animals and perhaps influence the public towards their protection and conservation.

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Carl Battreall is a professional mountain photographer and glacier guide. He is considered one of Alaska's leading conservation photographers and the winner of the 2007 Daniel Housberg Wilderness Image Award for Excellence in still and conservation photography. Carl's work focuses on Alaska's most remote and unprotected mountain regions and has been widely exhibited and published throughout North America. More of Carl's work can be seen at www.battreallphoto.com.



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