

Artist's Perspective...

## Focus on Lenses

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Just about anyone with a camera can and does journey out into nature to photograph "things." So how do we nature photographers see these "things" differently than the countless others when we are photographing the very same subject (s)? Well, what we want to convey with our camera and lens may or may not be what we actually see. This is where knowledge of the camera lens is very valuable information. What we see at the scene is not going to be what goes down on the film. It's the old saying of, "what you see is not what you get" and this applies to photography as well.



So what we are going to do is *start* to learn how to see more like the lens does? Why do we need to start learning this? Because, if we know what the lens will do to the scene (good or bad), we can make the right lens choice. This will put us in a place of control. We can then employ the lens which will communicate our interpretation of this scene or any scene. Now I am not saying this is a easy thing to do - to see like the lens. And, my little method for learning to see like your lenses see isn't scientific, but it works. It has worked for many photographers who have enrolled in my nature photography workshops.

We have a little exercise you can do if you would like to improve your photographic craft, the part that deals with seeing like your lens.

There are many photographers in history that used successfully only one focal length lens. They were able to do this because of their knowledge of how the particular lens they were using portrayed the subject. Some of these photographers, I'm sure, were limited as to the available funds for equipment, and therefore, due to financial hardship needed to understand their single lens (don't we all). Today, this is a totally different scenario. There are a wide variety of lenses on the market for photographers to use in photography. The different focal lengths available in 35mm alone is more than staggering.

What we will concentrate on are the most widely used and popular lenses. These focal length lenses are the primary choices for landscape photography. Our purpose is to understand how the lens will see our subject so we may use this knowledge when selecting the lens for each image made. The lens you choose is dependent on your knowledge of its use. Do not put one lens on your camera for the day! You will lose so much creativity when doing such a thing, unless of course, you only have the one lens.

### 20mm-35mm focal length

Using a short focal length lens can cause unwanted distortion. Use care when photographing people. This lens range will give a feeling of place to the image. By this, I mean the viewer will have the feeling of "being there" when looking at the finished picture. You will get the easiest control over depth of field with this choice. The shorter lens is also a good choice for showing a sense of scale. When using filters and/or a lens hood, you **must** make sure the lens angle of view does not become obstructed. This is very important.

## 70mm-150mm focal length

This is the lens range I use most. Its use allows for extracting a portion of your scene (tight compositions), which is the intimate portrait in landscape work. You may limit the background coverage with this focal length and it gives more working room (distance) from the subject with some scene compression. Filter use is much easier to work with than the wider focal lengths. The weight of these lenses is still fairly light, unless using very fast lenses (F 2.8). The use of a tripod is now becoming a common occurrence. A tripod should always be in good working order. This means you should maintain your equipment regularly.

The longer lenses are commonly used in wildlife and sports photography. I am not covering them in this article.

At the scene, we have our camera with lens on a tripod, camera loaded with film. We may also have a filter on the lens. From the scene to the film working towards the camera we have the scene, filter, lens, our exposure, film, and lastly, our film processing. In order we have: Processed film, Exposure, Film, Lens, (filter) Subject. The lens is very important when it comes to viewing your subject. It should be the finest piece of glass you can afford. I know quality costs and when it comes to fine optics, don't cut corners when buying lenses.

To test your lenses to discover how they see your subject, use different focal lengths on the same subject at the same distance. Change your distance and do the same as before. Change the distance one more time and use your lenses again.

As an example: use the following lengths 24mm, 35mm, 70mm, 200mm lenses at a distance of 5 feet, 10 feet, and 25 feet from the subject foreground. Expose three frames with each focal length lens. One at 5 feet, one at 10 feet, one at 25 feet. You should use the focal lengths you have closest to these sizes.

You will begin to see the subject in different perspective (the change in distance always alters the perspective) and you will see a difference in near/far relationships. Near/far relationships are affected as you move closer or farther away from the subject and when you change the focal length of the lens (this is the apparent middle ground and the size of subject matter). Keep the height of your camera constant for evaluation. What you want is an "apples to apples" comparison.

When you have your film processed, mark the slide mounts as to the focal length and distance to subject. You will then place these on the light box and be amazed as the lights come on. Because the Nature Photographers site is of limited space, I didn't post images to show examples with this article. You will have to go out in nature with camera in hand and "see" how your lens sees. Dedicate just one roll of film to this and grow by leaps and bounds.

With the image displayed with this article, you can see I had control of the photographic process and knew the look I wanted. I could only do this knowing which lens to choose to give the desired effect, slight compression. This lens choice the 105mm, pulled the furthest trees into the scene by compression.

*Editor's Note* - Visit Dales web site at [www.californiapictures.com](http://www.californiapictures.com) to view more of his work.

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