

AMERICAN Scientist

ESSAY

Is Nature Photography Too Beautiful?

A move toward “truth in labeling” would bring photographic arts more in line with ecological science.

Robert Louis Chianese

I am enthralled by stunning photos of nature. You probably are, too. Gorgeous images of landscapes, animals, plants, and exotic, undisturbed places adorn our walls as well as our advertisements, calendars, screen savers, and museum galleries. We all seem hooked.

Dramatic images of nature help shape our consciousness about the physical world, and classic landscape photos by C. E. Watkins, Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, and Robert Glenn Ketchum play a key part in modern cultural literacy about the environment and our evolving relationship to it. For this very reason, contemplating nature within the frame of photography also invites us to consider what sort of environmental understanding of our changing world nature photography does provide.

Conservation-minded photographers, such as the renowned Eliot Porter, often put photography to the political task of helping save the subjects they photograph. Even if you do not recognize his name, you surely know his work. His Glen Canyon series, *The Place No One Knew* (1963), composed for the Sierra Club, featured haunting, quasi-abstract images of rock formations and watercourses that evoked the canyon’s unappreciated, almost otherworldly majesty. By mastering Kodak’s new dye-transfer color process, Porter was able to craft tonally subtle images with the clarity and detail of black and white—the only respected medium of nature photography up to that point, made famous by his mentor, Ansel Adams. Sadly, even these new kinds of images could not stop the 1966 construction of the Glen Canyon Dam on the Colorado River, which put those spectacular locations permanently underwater.

Today, the digital revolution in photography results in natural scenery that never looked so alive, so vibrant and luminous, even transcendent, though many famous subjects we know are ecologically compromised, environmentally degraded, or simply destroyed. Nature photography today, with the added benefits of Adobe’s Photoshop, seems to revel in a hyper “grandeurism.” An essential of most nature photography as a genre is to move us to love and revere it; it further assumes that only through such a response will we feel the urge to preserve or restore it.

Contrariwise, pictures of environmental degradation may incite us, but they may just as likely turn off donors and drive activists away. Beauty sells, ugliness might repel. So we buy the dazzling calendar and join the organization.

The acclaimed novelist Lydia Millet has a starkly different reaction. She blasts the lush photos in the promotional calendars of most nature organizations as “eco-porn”:

This is picture-book nature. . . . Tarted up into perfectly circumscribed simulations of the wild, these props of mainstream environmentalism serve as surrogates for real engagement with wilderness, the way porn models serve as surrogates for real women. They are placebos substituting for triage... They offer comfort to the viewer: They will always be there, ideal, unblemished, available. They offer gratification without social cost; they satiate by providing objects for fantasy without making uncomfortable demands on the subject.

Millet’s excoriating remarks force us to re-think what we are looking at in those glowing shots of nature, but even the most “seductive” scenery does not excite lascivious emotion nor the potential sexual release of pornography. I would argue we likely become even more static in our contemplative, aesthetic responses to them. Millet implies as much.

There are other, creative approaches to involve us. The 2014 World Wildlife Fund calendar features individual photo-portraits of iconic animals—a tiger, rhino, ape, and polar bear. However, as headshots in blank backgrounds, removed from natural settings, they appear less than alluring and may even hint of stress. It’s as if their physical surroundings would portray them as too colorful, secure, settled in place. These solitary, starkly depicted animals seem to look out at us—from jail? or limbo?—for some answers to questions we must pose for them; how can we stop threatening their survival?

The photos from last year’s WWF calendar may have seemed less troubling because we could glimpse their surroundings, though the “December” close-up photo of a mother polar bear with its cub on its back, looking directly out at us, did make me worry about the cub’s future. That photo also included a conscientious truth-in-labeling caption: a short, unobtrusive, gentle comment at the bottom of the calendar section saying, “Polar bears are an indicator of conditions throughout the Arctic, and at-risk populations could signal threats in the marine ecosystem.” Here we are invited to contemplate the fate of an environment closely threatened by global warming by seeing one of its most beloved animals not just as a familiarly iconic one, but also as an indicator species of the environment’s overall health, which is rapidly declining. Actual science enhances—“colors,” we might say—our response to the photograph.

Photographers might go further. They might try to make uncomfortable demands on viewers, with portraits of environmental ruin. There’s even a new movement called “ruins photography” declaring itself a purveyor of “ruin porn” (that term again), mainly focused on urban decay and post-industrial blight. It tends, however, to aestheticize damaged urbanscapes like Detroit and Rust Belt cities, provoking critics to attack it as insensitive to the impoverished places and destitute people who inhabit them. Blight, even beautified, is a hard sell.

Some nature photographers specialize in bizarre alien landscapes, ones we have tarnished and trashed. Richard Misrach, whose subjects have ranged from seascapes to nuclear test sites, creates eerie scenes of desolation in photographing our desert intrusions. His scenes are at once grotesque and hypnotizing, surreal, but not without a kind of apocalyptic beauty. In a radical section of his *Desert Cantos* series, he trains his camera on a bomb crater and destroyed convoy in the Nevada weapons testing range. Could there be anything less alluring and more unnatural than this?

Misrach himself denies he’s invested in ugliness, nor does he see himself as an environmental activist. He does, however, criticize some foundational nature photographers, such as Ansel Adams, for deflecting us from reality with their commitment to beauty:

My main problem with Adams’ perfect unsullied pearls of wilderness, and with the Sierra Club and the Ansel Adams clones, is that they are perpetuating a myth that keeps people from looking at the truth about what we have done to the wilderness.



+ enlarge image



+ enlarge image

Does Misrach protest too much? Perhaps he believes that he alone serves up objective reality, cold truth, while famous others peddle the hot, alluring beauty-myth. Still, his photos have a formal artistry, deliberately limited tonality, and studied grotesqueness that make them appear anything but unfiltered reportage. He may be stuck in the beauty box too.

In her famous collection of essays *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag theorizes that the medium of photography itself keeps us outside the frame: viewers become voyeurs and uninvolved consumers of millions of images, distanced from the subjects. So is nature photography never able to engage our activist emotions for ameliorating the plight of the Earth? Perhaps we need to inform all the environmental organizations that bank on it.

We have at least one famous example of photographs of environmental degradation that sparked reform: the 1930s Dust Bowl photos of Dorothea Lange and other Farm Security Administration photographers. They trained America's eyes onto human-caused soil depletion in a period of prolonged drought that literally blew the land away. Lange's "Migrant Mother" portrait has become rightly famous, and dust storm photos brought the double dangers of drought and improper plowing into view.

The effects of these government-sponsored photographs, coupled with an all-out national effort to reduce poverty and change farming practices during the Depression, altered the consciousness of America about the connections between economy and ecology. These words have the same root—"ecos," or household; we live in and depend on both, and we still struggle to devise policy based on their interconnections. These 1930s photos have a powerful, black and white naive realism about them that seems far removed from the color-wheel aesthetics of nature photography today.

Consider the potential impact of a new school of "exposé photography," one that lays our pollutions bare. We could create a calendar decked out with toxic damage photos, 12 months of unaesthetic environmental horrors! The website Shutterstock offers more than 1,850 different photos of landfills. Under the heading of "environmental damage," the stock photo website Inmagine displays nearly 6,000 images that could fill up hundreds of calendars: the McMansion Footprint Calendar, the Urban Blight Calendar, the Junkyard Calendar (probably a favorite), the Clear Cut Calendar, the Smokestack and Dirty Skies Calendar, and so on. Acting on this notion, the BBC Wildlife Fund has already created an award-winning "Almost Extinct" calendar, in which each day of the year features an animal under the stress of our intrusions.

Again, this may be a pointless endeavor, if photography by its very nature aestheticizes and distances its subjects from viewers. But critical theory points out something much more obvious about photography, and potentially more useful. We capture a shot, shoot an image, thus metaphorically "kill" it by freezing it in time. We train our controlling eye and magisterial gaze on a scene and own it by snapping it. We hold it still, forever—in fact, a still life. The photo is a fleeting moment etched by light, taken out of time, and stored on film or chip.

All photography, we might argue, is therefore elegiac—a meditation on time and fleeting subjects caught and then lost to the ongoing present. This may be easiest to see with family photos. Elegies can be meditative without being mournful, formally acknowledging the passing of a moment or scene or prospect even as that subject carries on in real life.

With nature photography, though, the subject all too often goes on to degrade and suffer damage large and small, placing those elegies in a different context. If we adjust our concept of nature to fit truer ecological realities, we may be able to see nature photography itself reflect them. A glorious image of Yosemite's entrance can hold within it a sense of loss, an elegiac longing for the time when it was fully vital and powerful. Gorgeousness and grandeur themselves can come to signify loss.

This evokes an even more basic epistemological conflict: the tension between appearance and reality. Our eyes are an unreliable source about what's actual, since our concepts drive our vision. Immanuel Kant formulates it this way: "Concepts without percepts are empty; percepts without concepts are blind." Our dominant cultural concept of the natural world still carries over from the romantic nineteenth century, where Nature was posited as pure, wild, healthy, and endlessly regenerative. This can blind us to its present diminished state. The camera's images, beautiful or not, depict a reality we currently cannot or dare not see.

One strategy to bring the camera's images a little closer to reality is a practice I call "photographic calming." This is a technique of toning down, so that the gleaming light and colors in typical nature photography become subdued, tuned to meditative reflections on our threatened world. The range of exposure levels, contrasts, color saturation, and what Photoshop labels "vibrance" can be narrowed, not to take the blush off the rose, but to avoid depicting it with an enhanced ultra-radiant perfection.

Practicing this sort of tonal control would reveal by contrast that much of nature photography today is overly saturated with light and color. (This effect may be partly an artifact of our state-of-the-art digital cameras, monitors, and projectors, whose multibit pixels enhance light and color and seem to "tone up" or brighten most photos.)

Perhaps such calming is itself a distortion, an environmentally correct pall draped over the majesties of nature. But those glories are fading, and distorting them toward a subdued and tonalist register may be approved as a distortion that clarifies. We don't need a *Natura Noir*, a dark and forbidding photographic vision of the grim fate of the Earth; nor its contrary, the blare of *Natura Gloriosa*, with its hyped gorgeousness, which also obscures. Both enhancements and diminutions reflect values about what we see and understand about the natural world.

I've adjusted my own photo of Yosemite Valley both ways—hyped and calmed. We would not know from the hyped view that human-caused global warming afflicts Yosemite with a variety of ills. The massive Rim Wildfire nearby burned with such fury in August 2013 because of prolonged drought, brittle-dry vegetation, insect infestation, and numerous other effects exaggerated by climate change. Luckily the fire did not encroach into the valley itself, though smoke obscured its vistas. Ozone from cities floats into the valley as well. Heightened temperatures make it difficult for alpine creatures, such as picas, to survive at lower elevations as they once did. With less snowfall, trees proliferate and overshadow mountain meadows, stunting wildflower growth, and warmer temperatures shrink Yosemite's glaciers. None of this finds direct expression in either photo.

The less color-saturated photo, with its browner and grayer tones and less luminous sky and paler green vegetation, still expresses the scale and majesty of this famous prospect, but it insinuates all is not well, which it is not. It hints at fire, air pollution, and drought. Is it a lie? Perhaps, as is the one on the left, but its image is closer to the scientific and ecological truth rather than the glory shot on the left. The eyes of a viewer without environmental knowledge of the growing threats might "see" the hyped view, while the ecologically informed might look on the famous scene with a combination of respect and dread. Our conceptions drive our perceptions, and more accurate conceptions point to the calmed photograph as more "honest."

Photos of that nearby Rim Fire conflagration might serve a larger ecological purpose if they themselves did not become exciting, inflammatory icons with their own pop fascinations. Slightly more effective might be shots of the blighted aftermath of the fire, with dead trees littering the scoured, lifeless Earth. However, they provoke a whole new set of environmental concerns, from extensive winter flooding to demands by logging companies to clean up the 400-square-mile area by extracting trees, without regard to the ecological process of successional forest regrowth that requires them.

Finally, the features of Yosemite at risk from global warming can't fully be seen in the calmed photo, nor in the shots of flaming redwoods or burned forest floor. To convey that would require a narrative. We can therefore argue for a "truth in labeling" feature for nature photography. This would require an up-to-date scientific gloss on any subject, using the latest ecological information about the environmental health of it, visible or not.

More than a short comment about the scene, animal, or plant, such a science-based label would bring photographic arts in line with ecological science. Surely professional nature photographers, who are usually environmentally informed, need to affix such comments to their works the way news



[+ enlarge image](#)

photographers or editors do, clarifying what we are looking at; they can consult with scientists as well. Nature photography would find a purpose uniting visual aesthetics with ecological explanation. It would help revise both our stubborn percepts and concepts about nature along more realistic lines, and add to our general scientific literacy. Images of nature with commentary then could be in the service of preservation, bringing photographic art back to a classical program of being aesthetically "pleasing" and useful at the same time.

Bibliography

- British Broadcasting Corporation. 2011. Almost Extinct Calendar. London: BBC. www.olivermaltby.com/BBC-Wildlife-Fund-Almost-Extinct
- Millet, L. 2004. Ecoporn exposed. *High Country News*, in the *Utne Reader* September/October. www.utne.com/2004-09-01/EcopornExposed.aspx
- Porter, E. 1990. Amon Carter Museum. www.cartermuseum.org/collections/porter/collection.php?mcat+3&scat+12
- Sontag, S. 1977. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Tucker, A. W. 1966. *Crimes and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach*. New York: Bulfinch Press, Little Brown, with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

You can find this online at <http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/num2/2014/1/is-nature-photography-too-beautiful/1>
© 2014 Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society

