

2017

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Recommended Citation

Casey, Noelle, "Nature Photography - Conserving the Wilds for the Future". *The Trinity Papers (2011 - present)* (2017). Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT. <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers/56>

Nature Photography - Conserving the Wilds for the Future

Noelle Casey

What if the only way to convey the characteristics of an area of land to another was to either try to describe one's experience with words or to actually go to that place and have the experience for oneself? If this were true, people would not be able to feel the emotion of that place without really going there, and considering how many areas of wilderness there are, one would not be able to visit them all. This is why nature photography is so important in preserving the wild. Looking at a beautiful picture can prompt people to protect what they see. Nature photography is beneficial for conservation because it conveys messages that words cannot; it is able to show people sights that invoke powerful emotions, leading to efforts of preservation. Even though sometimes photography draws too much attention to an area of land, it is still the cause that was able to protect the lands in the first place.

Some well-known examples of nature photography conserving the wild are Ansel Adams' and Carleton Watkins' stunning photographs. Adams touched many people through his photographs of Yosemite Valley, making them realize the "importance of preserving the last remaining wilderness lands" (Turnage, 1980, 4). His photographs were able to lobby important government officials to help conserve the environment (Turnage, 1980, 4). Likewise, Watkins' photographs of Yosemite Valley caused Abraham Lincoln to sign an act in 1864 protecting Yosemite Valley from private mining and tree-cutting companies that were already taking interest in the land (Hickman, 2011). He was also prompted to sign this act because of the greedy people that pursued hydraulic mining in other valleys, which involved destroying entire rivers to get a very small amount of gold (Righter, 2005, 31). If Yosemite was not protected, it may have been used for hydraulic mining, or may have fallen to a similar fate as Hetch Hetchy Valley. Hetch Hetchy Valley was once a glorious sight, with waterfalls, cliffs, and a landscape that Native Americans used to inhabit (Righter, 2005, 11, 14). However, in 1913, San Francisco decided to build a dam for the city's needs, flooding the beautiful valley (Righter, 2005, 47). Perhaps, if Hetch Hetchy Valley was photographed with the same intensity as Yosemite Valley, it might have been protected along with it, preventing the damming of the area. Adams' and Watkins' photographs inspired many to protect Yosemite Valley from harm; their efforts, specifically Watkins', caused Congress to make Yosemite the "first federally protected wilderness area" (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, 251).

Watkins and other artists such as W.H. Jackson were also major influences in establishing Yellowstone as a National Park (Whittlesey, 1999, 4). The photographs of Yellowstone helped to explain and therefore transform the "perceptions of the West from a mythical realm to a place that could actually be visited and settled" (Whittlesey, 1999, 4). W.H. Jackson's images, combined with Thomas Moran's drawings, "helped convince a skeptical Congress that the area should in some way be preserved" (Whittlesey, 1999, 4). Yes, these photographs attracted many tourists, specifically the pictures William Henry Jackson took of the Grand Canyon at Yellowstone (Greenwald, 2007, 655). However, it is still better to preserve the

land and, even though it is destructive, build roads for development rather than get rid of it altogether.

Photographs of landscapes also inspired nationalism. During war, Ansel Adams took pictures of nature, one specifically of rocks (Turnage, 1980, 6). These pictures of their wilderness caused Americans to want to fight for the lands and protect them, therefore preserving them and protecting them from harm. Additionally, during the Civil War, Americans viewed Watkins' images of Yosemite as "a manifestation of God's continuing favor," making Yosemite an environmental park as well as a place of redemption (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, 256). This, in turn, would cause people to have reverence for the park, wanting to preserve it and make sure no harm comes to it. Romanticists specifically thought of the sublime landscape as an "expression of God," so they respected nature and would most likely do what they could to protect these places of God from destruction (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, 251). Watkins' photos also created a reality that did not actually exist (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, 242). The viewers, even today, see the version of nature that the photographs warrant, and the images want people to see an ideal nature (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, 244). Pictures do not just record events, they establish a way of "viewing that transforms the...experience...into a way of seeing" (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, 244). Watkins' photos do not represent reality, they create it; they made an icon out of wilderness (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, 244). This helped preserve nature because when people see these photos, they see a pristine wilderness that is perfect and beautiful. This causes them to want to keep that wilderness in the state that it is in the picture. These pictures hold proof that the land once was, or still is, in that beautiful condition. This will cause people to want to keep it that way, or if it is lost to development, protect other lands from incurring the same fate.

Landscape photography is linked with the birth of environmentalism (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, 242). When people saw these photos, they were encouraged to act to preserve their lands. Another form of photography that forced people into action was the many pictures of oil-soaked birds from the numerous oil spills such as the "eleven-day blowout on a Union Oil Company rig off the southern California coast [that] sent waves of oil onto Santa Barbara beaches" (Morse, 2012, 129). These pictures contradicted the thought that oil was reliable, safe, and beneficial (Morse, 2012, 124). It was still seen as powerful, abundant, and a source of dominance, but the attitude towards it changed from positive to negative (Morse, 2012, 124). Oil was now viewed as evil, and the American consumer was guilty of harming these animals (Morse, 2012, 124). This caused a shift in values from industrial growth and economic gain to a "focus on consumption of environmental amenities" such as "fresh air, clean water, and open space in local, state, and national parks" (Morse, 2012, 124). This also caused a rise of middle-class environmentalism,

which fostered a greater concern about pollution, wildlife populations, and environments (Morse, 2012, 124). The pictures of these oil-soaked bays, beaches, and animals ignited fear and made people act to be more careful (Morse, 2012, 128, 130). They stimulated anger concerning the “lax governmental regulation of offshore drilling,” which in turn caused people to rally for



Published in Life, March 1970. Courtesy George Silk/Time & Life Pictures/ Getty Images.

conservation (Morse, 2012, 130). The picture above shows a dead bluebill duck in the oil spill on January 1, 1970, caused by the tanker *Delian Apollon* in Tampa Bay, Florida (Morse, 2012, 131). Pictures like this moved people to help these animals by conserving the environment.

Many acts were passed because of the devastation from the oil spills, heightened by the images of suffering animals: The Marine Protection, Research,

and Sanctuaries Act; The Marine Mammal Protection Act; The Coastal Zone Management Act; The Clean Water Act; The Endangered Species Act; and the Environmental Protection was established (Morse, 2012, 130). These images showed humans that we are the problem because we are the ones polluting the world (Morse, 2012, 132). This caused people to participate in Earth Day, demonstrating their concerns of air and water pollution (Morse, 2012, 131). Clearly, in this case, nature photography was very beneficial for conservation; it motivated people to act against certain legislations, and encouraged them to become more aware of their actions concerning the environment (Morse, 2012). It also caused people to have a better appreciation for the environment and all of its resources, which in turn makes people care more about protecting their lands.

Photographs played a role in the environmental awakening (Seppänen and Välicerronen, 2003, 59). People were shaken by pictures of oil-covered birds, sick fish, and forests ruined by acid rain, so they started to become more aware of the environment and the destruction that was happening to it (Seppänen and Välicerronen, 2003, 59). Pictures are able to arouse emotions that cannot be described by words, which is important because if people see an animal injured by pollution in the environment, they will want to act to ensure that it does not happen again (Seppänen and Välicerronen, 2003, 59). Photos are crucial in the production of meaning because “visualization plays a key role in identifying and interpreting problems” (Seppänen and Välicerronen, 2003, 59, 60). This means that when people physically see an image of pollution, they are able realize that humans need to take more care in conserving the

planet (Seppänen and Välicerronenm, 2003). Images are also symbols of the environment; they show us what our environment should look like, and make us want to preserve it in that natural state (Seppänen and Välicerronenm, 2003, 61). Photographs show humans that nature does not exist separately; there is no 'inside' and 'outside' (Bright, 2014, 65-66). People do not live apart from nature, and photographs are showing us that nature is sick (Bright, 2014, 65-66). This tells us that nature should not just be protected for "spiritual and aesthetic reasons," but protecting nature is a scientific necessity (Bright, 2014, 64). If nature is sick, our communities are sick. Photographs of the bad effects of global warming would tell humans that protecting the environment is crucial. In order to live healthily, we need to keep our lands safe. While nature photography does invoke powerful emotions to help save parks, it can also attract unwanted attention. In this sense, nature photography can be both beneficial and destructive for conservation.

Although nature photography has been very beneficial in conserving the environment, people are still concerned about the negative effects it has particularly on national parks, forests, and lands. Ansel Adams believed that if tourists go to a national park, they will have such a deep experience there that they will become conservationists, because that was his experience (Spaulding, 1996). Because of this, he promoted the national parks through his pictures, causing many tourists to swarm to the parks (Spaulding, 1996). Now, there are so many tourists flocking to national parks that dirt roads are being turned into paved roads to make it more accessible to the public (Abbey, 1990, 45). "The old magic is [being] destroyed" because developments are interfering with the supposed majestic views of the area (Abbey, 1990, 46). Photographs, in a sense, have started to take over the authentic experience of nature because what we see in these pictures, of sublime pristine wilderness, is not something we can really access anymore (Seppänen and Välicerronenm, 2003, 64).

In addition, so many people would hike and camp in the wilderness without proper care for their surroundings that the land was "overuse[d] and abuse[d]" and there was a "loss of solitude and many of the very values that [people] went to the woods to seek," such as an escape from civilization (Waterman and Waterman, 1993, 103). Instead, they essentially brought civilization with them into the wilds, creating clearings from camping overuse, widening trails, and damaging the land (Waterman and Waterman, 1993). Clearly, nature photography does have some negative impacts on conservation, however, if the lands were not protected in the first place, there would potentially be no land at all because of private interests such as mining, damming, and commercial businesses.

Although the land has experienced some destruction because of nature photography, there are still ways that this damage can be repaired, transforming the land back into a healthy state. There needs to be a land ethic, not just laws, because most people do not follow the laws that are already in place to help nature. We know so little of the land that we have no right trying to manipulate it into what we think is beneficial (Leopold, 1986, 249). We do not grasp the interdependence of the land, so until we study it more, we should leave it alone (Leopold, 1986, 249). Research has shown that when a large mass of land is left to its own devices, that land is capable of maintaining itself very healthily, quickly rebuilding soil, and rarely losing any species to extinction (Leopold, 1986, 274). A land ethic would help us to better understand the land, and would show us how to correctly treat it. As proof that this could be helpful to nature, a new land ethic was released that taught people how to properly treat the land while still enjoying it; since it was implemented, the land has started to heal (Waterman and Waterman, 1993). Two clearings in the Krummholz near Greenleaf Hut that were created by too many campers have started to

return to their natural state of vegetation now that people are more educated on how they are supposed to treat the land (Waterman and Waterman, 1993, 103, 199-120). People are now more cautious of their actions, and the land has started to revive itself (Waterman and Waterman, 1993). This shows that although there has been destruction caused by the promotion of nature, there is still hope for the land to heal itself; the wilderness is not completely gone, as it would be if the lands were not initially preserved.

Although nature photography can at times be harmful for conservation, it is still one of the greatest causes of preservation because it shows people the beautiful landscapes that should be kept in their pristine conditions, it tells stories of pollution that cannot be put into words, and it evokes emotions that allow people to relate to what they are seeing. Nature photography is beneficial for conservation because it brings awareness of problems in the environment to the public. It also elicits emotional responses from people, causing them to act to protect their lands and environment; they can relate to pictures more than they can relate to words, and thus feel an emotional connection with what they are looking at. Instead of focusing on the negative impacts of environmental photography, we should instead be working towards establishing rules to protect against development, but we still need nature photography to preserve the terrain first. Through photographs, people become aware of their detrimental actions, and start to act against what they think is wrong, such as environmental policies and pollution problems. This is beneficial for conservation because it allows beautiful lands to be preserved for future generations, so that people hundreds of years later are able to experience the same sights and feelings as people long ago. Nature photography conveys images of beauty, and we need these images to show us that somewhere on this earth, there are places of paradise that we can retreat to, leaving behind the horrors of the world; we want to protect these lands so that we can experience these places forever, allowing future generations to experience these few gems that we have in our world.

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