



the *Magic* of DIGITAL
Landscape Photography

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A LARK PHOTOGRAPHY BOOK

how landscape photos can change the world

Essay by
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Cades Cove, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee.



Glacier Point, Yosemite National Park, California.

The vista is in front of me. I know that feeling, the one I get when I envision how the photograph might look. Will look—if I can get everything just right. Now it's a matter of the light. And the pesky technical details.

As the clouds roll into place and the sun weaves its magic, the potential is intoxicating. I think, “This will be the best photo I’ve ever taken.” Click. “It will look amazing on my wall.” Click, click. “My friends will be so impressed.” Click. “I’ll submit it to photo contests and see it on the cover of *Outdoor Photographer*.” Click, click, click.

I get the shot. It’s exhilarating. I’ve actually taken an excellent landscape photograph. You can probably identify with me—you’ve felt the same excitement as you’ve also recorded a shot you’re proud of. But now what?

There are many motivations for shooting landscape photography. All of the thoughts described above have crossed my mind as I envision a great landscape photo while looking through my viewfinder. But it is usually

reward enough to simply feel that inner peace of satisfaction as I recall the landscape itself in all its natural glory.

I’m sure that inner satisfaction is a common motivation, but further, I am actually embarrassed by the narrow scope of my ambition as a landscape photographer. I secretly feel that it’s shallow to let the picture gather dust on my wall, even if I do enjoy looking at it. That’s because I know that a good landscape photograph can do so much more.

A good landscape photograph can reach out to people. I know photographers, scientists, and conservationists who can recall the specific photos that first piqued their interest in the subject that turned into a lifelong passion. It’s amazing that something so simple as a photograph can have such a lasting effect on one’s life, how it can stir a person’s actions and influence their travels and even their career moves. The bond a person develops with a landscape that reaches them through a photograph is virtually unbreakable.

A compelling landscape photo not only reaches out to people, but can also draw them into the location—make them feel as if they are part of that moment, surrounded by that light, experiencing that nature. It can burn itself into a viewer’s mind and resonate for years—not only the subject of the photo, but also the details within the landscape: the curve of a tree limb; a shaft of light hitting a leaf; the texture of a cloud; a ripple in the water.

Every year, tens of thousands of photographers flock to Yosemite National Park. What inspires them to visit? In many cases, it is the timeless Ansel Adams photos hanging on their walls. It’s the countless photos they’ve seen featuring El Capitan gracing covers of photography magazines and calendars. These tourists have bonded with those photos. The photos inspire them to see the landscapes and experience the awe in person.



Rockhill Preserve, Apalachicola, Florida.

In fact, nature photography is often used as a tool to inspire. It can give a face to a natural area in need of protection. It can bring wildlife to one’s living room and make an ecosystem come alive. A collection of landscape photos can provide a window into the beauty of our entire planet. The same collection can also serve as a voice for disappearing landscapes and threatened environments, communicating a need for conserving the natural beauty in our wondrous world.

While photography has always been part of conservation communications, its role and value as a tool has reached an elevated status in recent years. Conservationists have started to notice the power of the photograph to inspire: Inspire donors to support conservation work, inspire individuals to vote for environmental protection, and inspire politicians to promote conservation.

I once worked for a conservation organization that surveyed its membership to assess what type of photo was most appreciated. The options were landscape, wildlife, and people pictures, all relating to conservation. The results showed a strong preference for landscape photography.

The survey demonstrates that a threatened landscape showcased in a dynamic photograph will effectively engage viewers. The sweeping vision will draw them into the scene, creating that unbreakable bond. The beauty within the landscape will inspire conservation because it’s seen as a wilderness worth protecting, as piece of the natural world worth investing in.

Many different types of landscapes can be used in what's been coined as "conservation marketing." Knowing an audience and creating a portfolio specifically for their interests can have a profound effect on the success that landscape photography will have on conservation action. For instance, wildlife biologists, outdoor enthusiasts, and avid birdwatchers can all relate to a landscape photo that includes a person holding binoculars. A landscape with someone on horseback can grab the attention of not only equestrian enthusiasts, but also of farmers and ranchers, two groups often neglected and alienated by conservationists. Before-and-after landscapes depicting environmental devastation are most useful in providing government entities hard evidence of an immediate threat.

It is not surprising to learn that professional photographers have been using their talents for decades to bestow a voice for pieces of the natural world in need of protection. During the 1950's and 60's, as the environmental movement blossomed, photographs brought attention to Ohio's Cuyahoga River, so full of chemicals that it actually caught fire. The resulting media attention on such an unnatural event helped spur the enactment of the Environmental Protection Act and the Clean Water Act.

Years later, a series of landscape photographs of old-growth trees in Tongass National Forest juxtaposed against pictures of clear-cutting brought attention to a portion of wilderness under threat. Once again, media and political attention resulted in the most comprehensive timber reform legislation in U.S. history.

Similarly, photos in a book about Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge inspired U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer to display pictures during a Senate hearing and to sponsor a 2003 anti-drilling bill. Controversy surrounding the photography ensued due to the political sensitivity of drilling at that time. The additional scrutiny supported the conservation cause because it drove more people to look at the beautiful photos of a landscape that was previously thought to be nothing more than an ice field.

In one of the biggest success stories of conservation photography, the late president of Gabon, Omar Bongo, viewed photos taken in his country during a major conservation campaign. He was struck by the natural wonders depicted in the photos, understanding that he had the power to protect these beautiful and important resources in his own backyard. Very quickly, President Bongo signed 13 national parks into creation in 2002. By protecting his country's unique and precious natural resources, President Bongo created an economic revenue stream resulting from ecotourism.

Such tales of how photography has changed the world might well be intimidating to an amateur nature photographer. When I look at my own photos, I like to recall these high-profile success stories of photography aiding conservation efforts. I'm reminded to strive to use my photos for some kind of greater good, especially to bring attention to conservation and environmental causes. However, I'm not so sure my photography will secure me fame or fortune, or even result in conservation legislation being enacted, and you probably feel the same way. So the question you might ask is, "What can I do with my photographs to make a difference?"

Having worked for a variety of conservation organizations, I know that every cause is catalyzed by powerful visual communications. Multimedia presentations communicate the work of conservationists to colleagues and partner organizations. Websites disseminate information, engage the public, and convey important messages. Marketing materials attract new donors and inspire the financial support of new projects. Scientific documents and political packages can make or break local conservation policy.

Every type of conservation medium can benefit from strong photography. And the preference is almost always to show landscape photography because it conveys the broadest perspective of what needs conserving. If the scientists and communications professionals are under deadline and don't have access to good photos, they'll usually settle for not-so-good photos.



Arches National Park, Utah.

Think about all of the pictures you have hanging on your wall or stored on your hard drive. Could your landscape photography do more than sit there? It would be unfortunate if someone in the conservation community, trying to protect a landscape that you had photographed, settled for substandard photography because your pictures are kept a little too close to your heart.

Land trusts are ubiquitous and desperately need visual documentation to support their work. Larger organizations, like The Nature Conservancy, have local offices with small budgets. They always appreciate a photographer interested in developing a free, yet mutually beneficial partnership. The internet is a fantastic resource and helps create instant virtual relationships, so getting your photos into a position where they can make a difference could be as simple as sending a few emails.

The rewards of such partnerships are multifaceted. Local conservation organizations can provide access to otherwise unattainable and often pristine landscapes. You first experience the exhilaration of taking great landscape photos that no other photographers have taken, and then you share your work with your new conservation partner, who uses the photos to encourage conservation action.

I believe the most gratifying satisfaction derived from your landscape efforts is the knowledge that your photos will serve a greater purpose by furthering the mission of conservation. And just maybe, if we continue to think creatively and work collaboratively, our landscape photography will affect one small corner of the world at a time.