

What makes a captivating image?

Imagine you've invited some friends over for dinner. You spend all afternoon preparing and cooking a well-planned meal. After dinner they proclaim it was one of the best meals they've ever eaten and then they ask "What kind of stove did you use?" In this context, it would be a nonsensical question but as a photographer, I'm frequently asked what kind of camera I use when well-meaning admirers view my images

The implication is that all the magic happens inside the camera, and the photographer is merely the lever puller who simply manipulates the marvelous technology that's really responsible for creating the magical images. The question usually comes from novice photographers who are looking for a shortcut to propel their own photography to a higher level and it may seem like an innocent and relevant question, but it fails to identify the secret that's the real foundation of stunning images.

Thirty years ago when I first began taking underwater pictures, I was consumed by the same quest. If I could just find a great underwater camera, I'd be able to take pictures for National Geographic just like the pros did. Every few years I would buy a better camera, a faster lens or a more durable housing. While that did

make a difference to the quality of the pictures I took, something was missing that took me years to detect. In my case, with underwater photography, I had some of the best equipment I could afford, but what was lacking was sufficient knowledge of my subjects.

This wasn't something I was aware of decades ago. Instead, it was a shortcoming that has only revealed itself in retrospect. Over time, as I learned more about the lives of the fish I was photographing, my images of them became more appealing and more penetrating. I began to study their behavior and their body language and I began to notice how my own body language, movements, and behavior affected them. In time, a kind of communication developed. I became able to recognize subtle cues from timid fish and learned how to approach them in non-threatening ways. I also learned how to send out my own signals which fish could decipher that would put them at ease.

My office bookshelves that were once filled with photography books began to be populated with books about fish and fish biology. As I learned more and more about my subjects, not only did my appreciation and knowledge for them grow, but my photography of them improved



dramatically.

Reading about fish was invaluable, but my real education came from the fish themselves. As I spent more and more time underwater observing and interacting with them, they divulged more and more about themselves. Over time and one by one, all their habits, routines, and individualities that weren't discussed in fish books were revealed like a cascade of unmasked secrets. I make no apologies for anthropomorphizing fish when I talk about their personalities. When you've spent as much time with them in their underwater habitats as I have, these conclusions feel not only justified but

undeniable.

Today, when young photographers ask me what kind of camera I use, I ignore the question entirely and instead encourage them to learn all they can about their subjects. In all areas of wildlife photography, if you fall in love with your subjects and let them teach you, it will be impossible for your images to not mirror that love and appreciation. And I think that single element, one that admittedly can't be quantified precisely, is what makes a captivating image.

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