

Ethics in wildlife photography

by Tim Priest

Wildscreen is a charity working around the world to promote nature conservation through wildlife photography. Their fifth WildPhotos meeting was held at the Royal Geographical Society in London to coincide with the announcement of the Veolia Environment Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2010 in October. Several successful photographers, including Hungarian Bence Máté, the overall winner, joined some of the world's best to share their expertise and celebrate keynote speaker David Doubilet. His images still astound professional photographers who work above the water.

Beautiful, sometimes challenging, images made WildPhotos a rewarding experience. The most beautiful, perhaps, Tim Laman's from Papua New Guinea where he is pursuing the almost unbelievable courtship displays of male birds of paradise, with a little time left over for the reefs of Raja Ampat. The most challenging, David Doubilet's images of the dolphin slaughter in Taiji.

Three themes occupied the speakers: conservation, ethics and technique. The scandal over Jose

Luis Rodriguez's wolf in last year's Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition and images of big cats, taken in a Montana game farm but presented (in the Daily Telegraph, amongst other newspapers) as coming from the wild, have brought into sharp focus a pressing question: how far can you trust an image? What lengths can you go to, to get an image? What does this mean for underwater photographers?

The audience at WildPhotos included a wide range, from seasoned (and famous) professionals to photo-club amateurs. A survey of the opinions of some 500 photographers was interesting, perhaps even enlightening:

95% would put out food to attract birds, and 70% would put out bait for predatory animals... but only 20% would consider live bait.

90% would photograph a tame animal, but only 70% would go to a zoo, and a mere 10% would shoot images in a game farm. 90% said that such images would have to include a caption making it explicit that they were not taken in the wild.

80% would remove elements such as distracting stalks of grass



Caribbean reef shark, scent bait, Little Bahama Bank. Nikon D200, 17-55mm, Anthis/Nexus housing, 1/250, f5.6, ISO 200

when editing an image, but only 5% would add visual elements. Most revealing, only 30% felt that this should be revealed to the viewer.

Mark Carwardine, zoologist, author, TV presenter (Last Chance to See) and Chairman of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition, identified three areas of controversy: the use of live bait, the use of animals that have become used to humans, and the digital manipulation of images.

Live bait: a lively debate. No-one was terribly concerned about mealworms being used to attract birds, but mice to attract owls was a species too far (for Europeans, at least). There was more concern about the impact of feeding on the behaviour of individual animals and on the ecosystem around them, potentially disrupting the food web and making top predators dependent on naturalists' hand-outs. This led to thinking

about the way in which animals can get used to humans, habituated to human presence by frequent contact, becoming in turn easier to photograph but no longer representative of the wild species.

Terrestrial wildlife photographers, in the main, see the impact of feeding and human interaction as bad things. Klaus Nigge, an eminent German photographer, artist and biologist, has a philosophy of “slow photography”, where prolonged research and familiarity with his target species combines with the use of technology and creative camouflage (he used a pelican-shaped tent in the Florida wetlands) to approach undisturbed animals after months or even years of preparation. Terrestrial photographers typically use hides (blinds in the USA) and telephoto lenses, options that are difficult in the underwater environment. We use natural cover, but nevertheless have to approach our subjects quite closely; the natural sensitivity of marine creatures to vibration and noise suggests the use of rebreathers as a kind of auditory camouflage, but it's not yet widespread. Worst of all, we don't have the time underwater to practice slow photography; even with repeated dives there is an opportunistic side to underwater photography, a moment when the image is in front of the lens,



Preparing bait, Catalina. Nikon Coolpix 5000 compact camera.

a moment that may not come again during the dive and perhaps not on repeated dives.

Shark feeding has much in common with game farming: the natural behaviour of the sharks is changed by human design, creating a group of sharks that can be relied on to perform in front of tourist divers. Shark baiting, using a scent trail, has been suggested as way of preserving normal behaviour, but it's pretty clear that the sharks' behaviour is changed,

if only insofar as they become more willing to approach divers. Are they still truly “wild”? The sharks' interaction with divers is much less predictable, their curiosity natural to a predator, but the encounter is still, in a sense, artificial.

If images of sharks promote shark conservation, do they need to be taken in truly wild circumstances? Conservation photographers such as Florian Schulz, who recently found huge numbers of devil rays



Nassau grouper and yellowtail snappers attracted to scent bait, Little Bahama Bank. Nikon D200, 10.5mm + Kenko x1.4 TC, Anthis/Nexus housing, 1/200, f8, ISO200, two Inon Z-240 strobes.

congregating in Baja California when studying animal migrations, and Italian Stefano Unterthiner, who revealed his professional secrets to WildPhotos (his “Plan B”: his wife takes charge!), show that they can work with minimal behavioral, environmental and ecological impact. Can that practice be emulated



The tiger shark poses for a different photographer. Nikon D200, 10.5mm + Kenko x1.4 TC, Anthis/Nexus housing, 1/160, f4.5, ISO200, Inon Z-240 strobe on the left.



Feeding fish to Southern Stingrays, Stingray City, Grand Cayman. Nikon D200, Tokina 10-17mm, Anthis/Nexus housing, 1/200, f10, ISO100, two Inon Z-240 strobes.



A lemon shark with scar tissue around an embedded fish-hook, Little Bahama Bank. Nikon D200, 10.5mm + Kenko x1.4 TC, Anthis/Nexus housing, 1/160, f5.6, ISO200, two Inon Z-240 strobes.

underwater? A code of conduct, as proposed by Martin Edge in *The Underwater Photographer*, is a start. Does the end justify misrepresenting the means? A consensus was that it doesn't. A further question: should we document the plastic rubbish and filth that intrudes into the water? Dead and dying animals? Does conservation photography have a duty to record the downside as well as the beauty and terror of the natural world?

Dutch photographer and publisher Danny Ellinger was amongst the first to use digital cameras in natural history photography when he took an expedition to the remote island of Aldabra, home of giant tortoises. He believes that the essence of photography is communication, not documentation. He was echoed by Joe Cornish, based in Yorkshire and devoted to the coastlines and mountains of Britain. Although he has used large format digital capture, his love is an Ebony 5x4in field camera

which, he says, is easier to use than digital (well, he is used to seeing the world upside down!). Joe describes landscape photography as a transcription of the landscape, not a description: it is an artist's interpretation. The theme of photography as transformation was taken further by Karen Glaser, an American who accepts the limitations of ambient light photography with Nikonos V cameras in deep water and in the murky water of the Everglades National Park and has exaggerated those limitations in her prints, mysteriously turning what many of us would throw away into evocative images of sharks in Cocos and swamps in Florida. Sandra Bartocha, a respected German photographer, has adopted an even more abstract style, rendering leaves and flowers as stripes and spots of glowing colour and leaving little or none of each image in focus. If this degree of abstraction works, and it does, why is "reality" still a touchstone of natural

history photography? We know that images are altered, even distorted, by the choice of lens, by film or by white balance, by exposure and by the optics of being underwater. Why, then, has digital manipulation been "outlawed" in a way that making prints from negatives and transparencies never was?

Photojournalist Nick Cobbing has been documenting research into global warming in the Arctic, his prize-winning images presented as a high-fidelity record of the melting Arctic ice and of scientists at work. Nevertheless, his images are highly selective and he stresses the importance of the photographer working to the direction of his editor. It is worth noting that Kathy Moran, the senior editor for natural history projects at National Geographic magazine, made a slightly confusing contribution to the discussion at WildPhotos. She expressed a strong preference for images created in the camera, without further digital manipulation,



Tiger shark, attracted by scent bait, a frequent visitor to divers from M/V Shearwater, Little Bahama Bank, backscatter removed from image by digital post-processing in Adobe Photoshop CS4. Nikon D200, 10.5mm, Anthis/Nexus housing, 1/160, f5.6, ISO 200, Inon Z240 strobe to the left of the image.

whilst also supporting roles for both artistic interpretation and photojournalism or photorealism. Perhaps more important was her insistence on real behaviour and on a record of the context in which a photograph was taken.

Mark Carwardine presented four principles as guidance:

The welfare of animals and plants and the care of the environment override any photographic aim.

Live bait and any bait that changes the behaviour of animals is not to be used.

Photographers must be honest in declaring the situation in which a photograph is taken.

Photographs should never be manipulated to misrepresent the behaviour and ecology of the subject.



Sign, Ocean Frontiers dive center, Grand Cayman. Nikon D200, 70-210mm, 1/250, f11, ISO100.

Scientists can't publish if they don't demonstrate that they have followed ethical research practices. What would happen if photographs were only published if photographers could show that they have followed these guidelines? How much distortion of the image, how much manipulation remains honest?

Almost everyone at Wildphotos had traveled a lot, seeking out rare or special things to photograph. A lot of them were worried about the environmental impact of traveling around the world, about CO2 and energy. Planes and boats and jeeps criss-cross continents carrying photographers and their excess baggage. There is a common mistrust of carbon offsetting schemes. Should we be traveling so much?

French photographer Laurent Geslin has worked with refugees in Senegal, but more recently has been working with foxes and urban wildlife nearer home, in London and Paris. Kai Fagerström is a prize-winner in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition with images of raccoon dogs, badgers and the other animals that occupy abandoned buildings at home in Finland. Should we devote more effort to our native marine life? What kind of a mark should we make?

Having written that, I should report that David Doubilet is still traveling the world in search of new images and inventing new techniques. He made exquisite images of nudibranchs, recently, by placing them in an opaque acrylic "studio" that was taken on the dive, later returning them to their original habitat. Pascal Kobeh, another winner from the Wildlife Photographer of the Year, has been traveling the world shooting stills as part of Disney's Oceans feature... and Mark Carwardine still travels to Baja California and the Sea of Cortez, and still finds himself able to charter light aircraft in search of Blue Whales. These photographers have all made a mark with their images, but are still affecting the sea by pursuing their passion for wildlife. What kind of a mark should we make?

Wildscreen are seeking films and photos representing the world's most endangered species, hoping to promote nature conservation through presenting the best images available.

www.arkive.org/get-involved

Tim Priest

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