



Beyond the Book®



- Q: Welcome to Beyond the Book my name is Chris Kenneally and I am in Albuquerque, New Mexico attending the annual summit of the North American Nature Photography Association. It's a fascinating opportunity to learn a little bit more about the world of photography and the publishing of photography. Joining me is Susan McElhinney. She is the photo editor for *Ranger Rick Magazine*, a favorite among families everywhere I'm sure. And she is also on the board of NANPA. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Susan.
- A: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.
- Q: It's a pleasure to have you and it's an opportunity to learn a little bit more about the obstacles and the opportunities that a photographer is faced when submitting to a publication of the quality like *Ranger Rick* and what I wanted to do was kind of retrace the presentation that you gave during the summit yesterday at the professional issues committee, and that is submitting in a digital world. But we have to start with a kind of surprise note and that is that nature photographer's are among the last in the photography pack to join this digital revolution. I was surprised by that.
- A: Absolutely, it's really a function of the fact that nature photographers work in the least professional manner. Most of them are surviving by the skin of their teeth. As a consequence, these are people who, when we were still in analog, might only have two cameras and a couple lenses and then the way that they work is they go out – their overhead is maybe a camper and a tent and a backpack and they go and pursue their thing. Now, there are other photographers at the other extreme, but by and large they are sort of at the far reaches of the photography profession. I personally come from a news background. In the news industry, of course they lead the revolution. That's not quite true. Actually the fashion and advertising business lead the revolution with regard to digital because it was absolutely the most convenient and professional way of presenting materials. But, for nature photographers, they've been very slow to come on.
- Q: Well then I suppose for some of them, it was the dilemma of investing in the new equipment. But I was wondering too whether it's just – I mean nature and environmentalism, there's a simplicity and a kind of natural response. Maybe some of them just felt that the digital photography thing was not in sync with their own lifestyle and their own personal goals?
- A: There's no question. I mean, my favorite case is a photographer who lives in Alaska and he was a wonderful *National Geographic* photographer and stuff, but for years, for 15-20 years, he didn't even have electricity in his house. He was such a hermit. But he knew everything about every owl, every loon, every bear, every elk,



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or whatever, caribou, in the area. It was very interesting. But he did come on and he came on about 20 years ago.

The other thing is there's a generational thing. There are some older people in the business who are just not going to quite catch up. But it is a significant investment and it's not something to be taken lightly. One photographer that I did a personal quiz with regard to this a couple years ago and some very serious underwater photographers who lead trips and stuff. But they say that they have to invest about \$70,000 a year in equipment and that includes computer equipment to hardware, software and the cameras and things to keep up with this. And it is a significant investment.

I use this argument to justify what I pay photographers. I explain that when I was – I started in the business and I was a photographer for Newsweek, a camera body cost me \$300 and a lens cost me maybe \$500 and I had a couple of camera bodies and three, four lenses and I could go and cover the White House and do all of that. And right now, that same photographer has to have a \$5,000 camera body, and four \$5,000 lenses, etc. But in 1974, I was getting paid \$350 a day, now that same photographer is only getting paid \$500 a day. And do the math.

- Q: You know I would hope that no matter what happens with the industry, the bravery and the willingness to kind of go just that extra mile that nature photographers exhibit is going to still be valued. You know, I was thinking about it last night, and I thought there will always be a need for people who are brave enough and hardy enough to go out to some of the really remote areas and capture those images. That can't be done sitting in some city at a computer.
- A: No, indeed, and they really are a special breed. The photographer who can not only go out there and endure the elements and stuff, but also who is smart enough to put this together scientifically to figure out what the subject matter is, how to approach it, how to find it, how to capture it, how to get it on film. I mean, it's a very complex group of skills. And I might add that today in this particular environment of conservation that we're going into now, I personally think it's the last really important arena of photojournalism. That it really crosses over to that, that it's really important that they come back with these stories and tell us these stories so that we out here actually understand these subjects and these problems much better.
- Q: Well, let's talk about some practical matters and kind of take a look at your guidelines, but first, for those who are making that transition from the transparency to the digital submission, talk about what they should be aware of and how they need to inform the editors they are submitting to. That perhaps this was a slide original, but now it's been scanned into a digital form?



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- A: It can be very hard sometimes to detect when I'm looking at low res scans. A low res scan of course is a very small file and when everything's digitized, even a good digital capture file cannot look it's best, particularly if the photographer hasn't processed it well. But a slide, it is very important to have that information in the metadata, whether it is a slide or a digital capture original, because it's all the more information I have to make the case for how this picture will get used, will help you sell the pictures better.
- Q: Right, and we're going to have a conversation about metadata and some of the aspects of that, but your message yesterday was how a photographer must be forthcoming. The information that they submit to you is as important as the picture really.
- A: Absolutely. Slides – there was something about slides when they were first created, this was the nature of a photograph. You went out there, you snapped the shutter and you captured an image. Nobody questioned that. And that's still valued. Sometimes now people will scan a slide and do some things to it and it's really problematic because the veracity of the image is really everything that we have.
- Q: Well it seems to me that with the particular photography you're looking for, you're talking about nature photography, if we can't trust the veracity of the image then we're really going down a very slippery slope very quickly because the beauty of *Ranger Rick*, and I recall it coming to my house for my daughter when she was small was that sense of wonder and excitement, but the knowledge was that very frightening looking spider or beautiful jaguar really did exist.
- A: Yes, it's the truth telling. It's the absolute truth on that page. It's really critical, truth in advertising, as I like to say. You send me some images, I want to know that that's, what I'm seeing is what I'm getting. It's critical. Without that veracity there's no reason for any of us going out there and shooting these pictures because nobody will believe it. And each incidence of crossing that line into telling little white lies, it just undermines everybody, including yourself.
- Q: And the message of the photograph, I would think too. Well in the metadata then, what are some critical elements? I know you said that the date is important. Why would that be important and tell us about some other critical elements that as an editor you need to have.
- A: Well I believe in dating images. It has not been something that had been done traditionally because photos, stock agencies don't want pictures date because they don't want them to appear old. The fact of the matter is, increasingly in this environmental age, if I'm doing a story about the Rio Grande, and water issues, I



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may want to know that that picture was taken in 1986 during the drought or in 1992 during a flood. This information is important. It's also important because species are disappearing everyday. For just all those very obvious reasons. And of course, I don't need to know necessarily when that chimpanzee was photographed, but if Jane Goodall is in the picture with the chimpanzee then it is relevant when that picture was taken of Jane Goodall.

Q: And there are other aspects of metadata I would assume that are important. The identification of the photographer and I'm going to admit to ignorance here, and I wonder if you could tell us about some of the fields that absolutely must be filled in for you?

A: Well to begin with, copyright. I mean, it's such a basic issue. Are these pictures yours? Are you interested in retaining these for your own purposes and to make some money and just to have your name on them? So the identity of the person who has shot the picture, the copyright owner, the scientific information about the subject matter. If you bothered to go out there, spend the money to get out there and then put this image up on some site somewhere, why would you not put all the information you could possibly put on there? People used to cram tons of information on a little, tiny slide mount. Now they could write a novel in the metadata and I surprisingly get an amazing number of pictures that have nothing.

And it's when I am trying to put together a story, I edit pictures and then I have to present them to the editors. The editors start asking questions. If that information is in the metadata, there's a far greater likelihood that I will be able to sell that image to the editors. I may be sold on that picture for the particular behavioral characteristic or the portraiture, but if it doesn't have the proper metadata or any metadata in it, I'm just going to – in all likelihood, I'm going to drop it in favor of something else. We spend an incredible number of man hours going out and chasing down information and we shouldn't have to do that. And I might emphasize accurate information. Scientific name, common names, location, country, where in that country, and increasingly with cameras now, you can geotag things, so we really do know where they were taken. It is a freeware that you can get off the Internet. I would consider using it.

Q: Well that's interesting to me because I had thought earlier that metadata was a question for people like Copyright Clearance Center, or for editors wanting to know who owns what. But I never thought about how it actually can support the editorial decisions that you are making and make that process a better one. And as a former freelance journalist myself, I know anything that makes my editor's job easier is good for me.



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- A: Absolutely. The more information that I can bring to a story teaming process, which is myself and the senior editor and the writer on the project, and I might know and I'll step back here and say *Ranger Rick* and *Big Backyard*, and *Wild Animal Baby* are all image driven publications which means that if the images can tell the story, the writers have to play catch up with that. So I have a significant amount of clout in that regard, in shaping the story and sort of dictating where it's going to go. But I can't do that without the information. And we're not unique in the business, there are not very many who do this. There are a lot of outfits that are looking to just fill a hole. But they still also need that metadata. I mean that editor who is trying to fill that hole, that text driven editor who says I have to have such and such a kind of frog doing this kind of behavior. Sometimes it will be well the frog is just the back leg just slipped on the rock, it didn't just jump. So this information, this very precise information is critical.
- Q: Well thank you for sharing those insights with us. We've been speaking with Susan McElhinney who is the photo editor for *Ranger Rick Magazine* and a member of the board of the North American Nature Photography Association. This is Chris Kenneally reporting from Albuquerque, New Mexico at the annual summit of NANPA, hoping you'll join us again for another episode of Beyond the Book very soon.

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